OO: ...Farmer Labor Association and I spoke at the ward organizations and a number of people came up, it was a pretty democratic organization at that level, but and this is something you could check with others, many of the rural counties the Farmer Labor Association, the Farmer Labor Party as far as control is concerned particularly in the Floyd Olson period rested with small town businessmen and county office holders and the farmers would be called on to vote, the farmers would actually [unclear] called on to come to the county convention, these people were suffering hard times as businessmen and all and they could support a Floyd Olson because Floyd was their kind of a guy, they really thought of him as such. [Unclear] interference and real participation but honest to God the poor farmer farming 160 acres down in Swift County, they wanted that businessman from Benson, that small town banker in Appleton and so on and so forth, those were the people who really ran affairs of the Farmer Labor Party in the counties, so we can't you know get romantic about the democratic character of the Farmer Labor Association, that was not as true on the Iron Range or in Duluth and that was the fight always within the Farmer Labor Party.

TO: In terms of participation would you say something like it was the Range then and then Hennepin County and Ramsey County were the three?

OO: Right, right, they were dominant. Then the of course the northwestern part of the state, that was always heavily Farmer Labor.

TO: That's the old...

OO: The old 9th, Buckler had been a member of Congress, Hagen for who was his secretary, for a very brief period was associated with the real Left or claimed to be, succeeded him but I think for only one term.

TO: They had a, that was a stronghold for the Non-Partisan League in the caucuses...

OO: Right, yes, there was a good deal of carryover from North Dakota.

TT: Right.

OO: Yeah.

TO: I got another, before we get back to this I just want to follow up some of this. Earlier in the
'30s there was the Farm Holiday movement which was fairly broad based for a time.

OO:  Right, John Bush was...

TO:  John Bush, right, we talked to...

OO:  Yeah.

TO:  But I think about '34 that as an organization started collapsing.

OO:  Well no in '34 I'd say that the Farm Holiday Association was very strong, '34 and '35 and I was the Relief Administrator for the Kandiyohi-Swift County at the time and in the county below us and I can't recall whether it was in Chippewa or Lac Qui Parle we had instances of the Farm Holiday movement actually moving in and unloading on their own carloads of grain which the government had not yet released to anybody.  They didn't put up with the bureaucracy, the farmers came in, drove up with their wagons, you got to remember their cattle and horses were starving, the fields were nothing but dirt and thistles and they came in and they broke the seals and unloaded the grain themselves, I would say the Farm Labor movement, I mean the Farm Holiday movement.  Similarly when they were building the Lac Qui Parle damn, that would be in 1935 I think the Farm Holiday movement associated itself with the labor movement in organizing all the workers on that damn, cause many of the farmers not being able to farm on account of the drought were working on that damn as well.

TO:  Well do you think that in areas where the Holiday was strong, the participation of rank and file farmers in the Party was apt to be stronger?

OO:  Yes, but they weren't really a part of the Party apparatus, they were plenty influential when it came to the elections.  And Floyd Olson had to listen to them.

TO:  Right, well he was friends with...

OO:  He had to listen to them.

TO:  Now do you have any insights into the split that occurred between, we talked I don't know if it's pronounced Bush or Bosh, he pronounces it Bush doesn't he?

ST:  Bush.

OO:  John Bosh?  Yeah, all right.

TO:  He [unclear] Floyd Olson, and claimed that he was one of his closest friends.

OO:  He what?

TO:  He loved Floyd Olson and claims they were you know real tight.

OO:  Yes, yes.
TO: And he had very little to say good about Elmer and also the Communist Party and sort of lumped them all together. Do you have insights into how that split occurred and how you know...

OO: Well I really wasn't aware of [unclear] part of this, but it's an interesting thing, and just keep it in the back of your mind. His wife, I think it was his second wife was a member of the Communist Party.

TO: Oh no.

ST: Was that Olive?

OO: Olive.

ST: [Unclear] Felt.

OO: Yeah, Olive Felt, she and I were classmates in a history class at [unclear] once.

ST: Maybe we can get a little of your history...

OO: You're asking a question of a split with Elmer and I'm... course I always had a feeling that, you know John Bush, the farm organizer and all, but he dressed like a Minneapolis downtown businessman and somehow he never fit the picture as a militant farm leader, never did in those days to me and I knew him, I knew him quite well as far as that goes. I can't answer your question.

TO: Okay. Well let's go back and then come back to [unclear]

OO: I think John did think that he was deserving of much more attention and perhaps a high post and he didn't get it.

ST: Maybe we could just real briefly get some background that you're talking about of you your growing up and where you got some of your values and get into the Socialist Party and get into the...

OO: Well I was brought up on 6th Street in Minneapolis, do you know where Fairview Hospital is?

TO: Right.

OO: I lived right next door to it. I was born next to the railroad tracks on 29th Street, but... We lived there, my father was a laborer in the Post Office, then became a clerk. We as kids used to, by the way, both were born in this country, their parents and older siblings had been born in Norway. My mother was a country girl, my father and his brothers were all workers, pattern makers, machinists, my father worked in a barrel factory, had gone go work at the age of 12 driving a team, his father had been killed in a railroad crossing, the team survived, the next morning at the age of 12, he'd just finished 8th grade, the boss says you take the team, they know where to go. And we were brought up in a Lutheran home, we learned our catechism in Norwegian. Father was a strict taskmaster on that. We had no books, we had the Bible, a book of Bible stories and a picture book of the Spanish American War. My father read the daily newspaper cover to cover. They were anxious that we kids get educated. We worked as kids, we used to go down to the Mississippi River Bank
which was dumping ground, take gunny sacks and collect scrap iron, bottles and stuff, but we you know, the usual things, paper routes and... We were in church, I was active in church as a young person, I was in Luther League, taught the Sunday School, taught Bible Class, even until I got in the University and in fact I sometimes wake up at night, I told this to Tutie, I kind of crawled cause I was about 17 or 18 and the University Y sent me over to make the Easter Sunday sermon at Stillwater State Prison and when I think of the gall of those people and myself, a kid coming and talking to the prisoners on Easter Sunday, you know it just makes me crawl now. But I woke up at about 18, 19, I no longer played this kind of thing. And that was it. But strangely I'd come to the notion of socialism through Christianity.

TO: It's not so strange.

OO: Well it's not so strange, no, it really isn't but many people find it very strange. I didn't then, I don't now, but that's how I came to support the idea of socialism. I had no theoretical training at all, none whatsoever and didn't get it at the University, wasn't exposed to it even at the University, none whatsoever. Worked as a kid in high school, got through high school, best job I could get and maybe it's a start in politics, [unclear] figured out that alderman had something to do with passing out of city jobs, so I said to my father let's go and see Alerman Bastes, 6th Ward, tell him to get a job as a city laborer cause that's the only I'll earn money to go to college, I was 16. So I got a job as a day laborer and when they were building the Cedar Avenue Bridge, and incidentally I became an iron worker because a couple guys had gotten killed on the high work so they took some of us younger fellas, gave us a belt and a wrench and we paid the union $2 a day and we were iron workers, had to climb the scaffold. And I used to work the Post Office nights, go to school one quarter, drop out, work, go to school again and so on. And that's the story of those early years. Comes the 1931-32 period I was married in 1930, had a daughter by '31, was working as sub-clerk at the Post Office, as kind of a steady thing and picking up jobs shoveling snow for the city and anything else I could get and coaching part-time. I walked all over that town by foot looking for jobs, I lived near Lake Nokomis and I walked from the Minneapolis Post Office in the afternoon, might get 30 minutes work, might get none, might two hours at 65 cents an hour, that's the way it was during those days. In '31, early in 1933 or late in '33 there was an announcement that the state under federal auspices was going to have a class to train people for relief administration and the, if one were married one got $10 a week for taking the course. I got $10 a week, and there were about 100 and some of us in the course and my first problem was to get in. Dr. Youngdahl said, by the way [unclear] Luther Youngdahl's brother, Benjamin Youngdahl, and who was a socialist at heart, later went to the University of Missouri, Washington in St. Louis, Washington U in St. Louis, said he couldn't put me on, why not, couldn't let me into the course, why not. I had got into see him by saying that Dr. Lamby had sent me, Lamby didn't know me from a hole in the wall, but I got into see him. I had a copy of the Nation in my pocket, I had a copy of an article I'd written on conditions in Minneapolis among the workers, course of it get talking with Dr. Youngdahl about it, he ends up and he says Mr. Olson we can't hire you you don't have a major in sociology, you don't have that kind of a background and okay, that was it. [Unclear] the next morning I get a telegram from him, report to the class. The end of it, I was given the job as a county relief worker or county relief administrator up in Pennington County, Thief River Falls, March 1st, 1934 and in my, as a part of the training period, really bumped into things, we'd been living in poor neighborhood, but I went out to the relief workers out of the Hennepin County office, it was a shock to me of course to find an industrial engineer, nice big home, except it was stripped of furniture, he had sold it. He had kids sleeping on the mats on the floor, stuff like that, just no way of
finding a job and others like that and I, despite the neighborhood we lived in, I hadn't realized that it happened to people like that too. I went up to Pennington County as a relief worker and I had, I remember there was a, what the hell do they call them, nutritionist on the staff, and two social workers and it was my job to develop a work relief program and hand out grocery orders and determine whether or not the people qualify. And you had to deal through the County Board of Commissioners. You were allowed for example to fit a man with dentures...to get a man's teeth pulled if they affected, if they were bad and affected his health, but the County Commissioners had to pay for the dentures and what happened, I would authorize and write the appropriate voucher for a guy to get his teeth pulled and then the son of a bitch the County Board of Commissioners would not give him dentures.

ST: Oh no.

OO: No, I'm not, I'm not joking, maybe this is an appropriate thing you're interested in...

ST: No, it sure is.

OO: But I think some of these things, they stick with me and you can imagine the kind of influence they had. Incidentally the County Board of Commissioners was a Farmer Labor County Board of Commissioners, you can't forget, they were Floyd Olson adherents. Then I went out, I got a call, the sheriff called me, tells me about John Helley, a farmer, he's in trouble, you'd better get out there. I go out there, John Helley and his wife had seven kids, he had been farming his mother's farm, his cattle had gotten into black mustard, and lost them all, and lost the farm, had to food, no anything. But his mother had owned, I've forgotten how we referred to it, a piece of property east of Thief River Falls, about 160, 20 60 acres, not been broken, Muskeg Swamp and John says I can make a farm out of it, so I think to myself what's the sense of this program. So I take the guys that you know I have working for work relief orders, grocery orders and so on, haul them out there in trucks and we start breaking the land, took, I bought with grocery orders from the tar barns, two old box cars, one became their home, one became a barn and settled that family out there. And I got complete hell from the state relief, who ever gave me authority to sign the relief orders for that guy. Oh I even bought him mustangs, I didn't know a horse from [unclear] but we went out to the stockyards, for about $20 a piece, now remember I used grocery orders and we bought two so that he had some horses. Later I get a call one night, in the middle of the night, two in the morning perhaps, from the hospital that John, that Mr. and Mrs. John Helley are here at the hospital, Mrs. Helley is ill and needs to be admitted, what are you going to do about. I said why don't you admit them. We need authorization. So I went to the hospital, saw they were admitted, the county attorney a few days later raises hell with me. Says I want John Helley in my office, we go up there and he says John Helley the trouble with you is you're nothing but an oversexed bastard, that's why you're in this trouble, you know he had seven kids and by then maybe eight, I've forgotten which, but that was the temper of the small town county attorneys, businessmen and so on. In the face of this terrible situation that existed. I, I just cite this to list some of the things we went through and learn something from them, I think we did.

ST: But on that level then, you know they were not, they were Farmer Laborites but they had not been affected by the ideology.

OO: That's right, yeah, they were Floyd Olson Farmer Laborites. I subsequently, that fall, went to
Swift County, Benson, Minnesota and I would say that at that time I used to hear about but I never knew Elmer Benson, cause all the small town businessmen, to all the small town businessmen he was a hero, he'd been a banker, cashier in the bank, he had been the commander of the American Legion down there, [unclear] district commander and everything else, it was a terrible drought period, just awful. So I had another dizzy idea, as part of their work relief program farmers were, the County Board always wanted cheap labor and they wanted their roads graveled and they wanted to use the farmers to haul the gravel, and we were doing it except the horses were so drawn they could hardly pull a empty wagon, let alone a full one. So I thought why not set up a shop in town and we'll do something about the condition of their machinery, their wagons and everything else. I went around to local hardware men, the other dealers and so on and I said we'll buy the parts from you and the paint from you and everything else. Instead of this kind of projects, we'll have a project here guys'll bring in their machinery, everybody will according to their skills will repair these blinders which have been ruined by thistles and everything else, the dust and the dirt. They brought in all their equipment and the guys worked on doing that kind of thing. Had a guy come out from Washington look it over, geez, thought it was the greatest idea ever, he was from the University Ag School in Oregon, but he was one of the big shots in the ERA administration in Washington. But a week later I get a telegraph, must cease, you are anticipating a program not yet underway, namely Rural Rehabilitation Program when it came. But to the man, to me it made sense, give them an incentive, that they got to have the groceries, they got to have the feed for their cattle, let them work getting their own equipment in shape, the little guy, the little merchants here will get the business for the paint and tools and the rest of it. It had to stop. So, anyhow that's part of the [unclear].

TO: During this time, were you part of, you were a Farmer Laborite, you were part of...

OO: I was a Farmer Laborite in terms of my...a socialist in terms of my thinking, I really was not too keen on Floyd Olson as a result of my experience with the small town businessmen who were so strong for him.

?: You guys want...

?: Sure... [Tape clicks]

ST: So your philosophy, or how you got involved in the farm...

TO: Farmer Labor Party?

ST: Farmer Labor Party.

OO: Well, while, you mean organizationally?

ST: Yeah.

TO: Right.

OO: Keep in mind I voted Farmer Labor. I really could not you see, actually become active in the Farmer Labor Association until there in the spring of '37 when I had the split with Chris Gow publicly. And at that time the Minneapolis Central Labor Union went to Elmer Benson and asked
that I be appointed in Judge Boyer's place as Director of Personnel in the State Highway Department. Well from then on I was active in the Association and remained so. Now during the war years of course I was in Washington and any association I had with the Farmer Labor movement at that time was pretty casual except that in the preparation for the merger I had many meetings with Oscar, Jack Ewing who was Vice Chairman of the National Democratic Committee and who was the, the national party's go-between in handling the arrangements for the merger of the two parties in '44. But I was not myself even at the '44 convention because I was in War Shipping, and I was in charge of equipment and that in the Merchant Marine. But I was in close touch constantly during that period.

TO: Well, let's see, what happened, did you actually go down from, what was the county, Pennington?

OO: Pennington County, then we went down to Swift County.

TO: Then you went down to Swift.

OO: Swift County, then I had charge of Swift and Willmar...and Kandiyohi Counties, the relief administration, both drought relief, work relief, human relief programs. And along the WPA was organized, developed and a man came out who'd been with the LaFollette Committee. Do you know what the LaFollette Committee and the Nye Committee were, he'd been with the Nye Committee actually and somehow he had heard of me and he came out to talk to me about becoming a, I've forgotten what we called it but it was involved with the use of manpower and labor relations in the WPA program and I was given the job in Duluth for the recruitment, assignment of manpower in the WPA plus labor relations. From there I went down to St. Paul as the, in the same job on a state level.

ST: When you said that, you were a socialist in your thinking...

OO: Yeah.

ST: Were you officially in the Socialist Party or how did you become acquainted with it?

OO: I went to a socialist meeting down in my own neighborhood, downtown, I had a little red card, I think it was two bits and I thought of myself as a socialist.

TO: A red card. Did you save the card?

OO: No.

ST: So did you do a lot of reading of the socialist theory and stuff like that?

OO: I did not do a lot of reading of the socialist theory, I'd read the Communist Manifesto, I read the socialist tracts, and I'd say that was about it.

TO: I suppose you read the Leader though?

OO: I beg your pardon?
TO: Did you read the Leader?

OO: Oh, the Minnesota Leader? Oh of course.

TO: Right. I think you learn a lot just from reading that.

OO: I beg your pardon?

TO: You can learn a lot just from reading that.

OO: Oh yes, well of course I've read that, and about, it wasn't until about '35 that I became a regular reader of the Daily Worker as well, after all then I'd grown up.

TO: Yeah, right.

OO: And I used to pick up you know the radical newspaper, my father used to occasionally bring home something of sort of a radical nature. But...

TO: How'd you get...

OO: There's one thing about us in that period, now see I'm born in 1908, so I'm a county relief worker in 1934, I'm not yet 26. I'm WPA administrator for Hennepin County in 19, late 1936, I'm just 28 years old. But I and I think all of my friends who were associated in public work, social work or teaching, whatever, had a sense of commitment to doing a job. We really felt it, it wasn't a, we weren't bureaucrats in that sense.

TO: Right, right.

OO: I don't mean that that didn't happen, I saw it happen very terrible when we were in Washington, but we were very committed to our jobs.

TO: I heard people who, you had pretty much a dramatic sounds like break from your career as a bureaucrat, back although I don't know what you did after you left Washington. Did you stay [unclear]

OO: Well what happened in Washington, see I'd been in war shipping administration during the war years. Incidentally I'd been with the National Youth Administration and got bounced one day as a red and that's a story that would interest you in terms of New Deal and how some of this worked out, but it's a separate story, but at any rate, I got back into war shipping, or got into war shipping and incidentally I got cleared by Navy Intelligence, Army Intelligence, I got cleared by everybody but Civil Service and I, nor could I get a passport, it was amazing. I had to go, when I went to sea I didn't have a seaman's passport. Well what happened was the war was ending, Sydney Hellman had formed the CIO Pact and then the National Citizens Pact and our friends got together and they said if Elmer's going to head the Citizen's Pact, Orville be better be with him. At the same time I'd been offered by Munoz Marim who was then, we didn't call him governor I don't think of Puerto Rico, a job to come down there. He wanted me down there, spend a month four times a year, it was a good job, and no, I was committed to go with Benson and we were organizing National Citizens Pact and
we made a tour of the country and so on.

TO: That's the pact that [unclear]

OO: That's what?

TO: Was that, who's that woman that you thought we should speak with?

OO: CIO Pact, she was with...

TO: Oh she was with CIO Pact, okay.

OO: Right, yeah. But that's when I left the government, course I'd have been out...

TO: You would have been out eventually.

OO: I would have been out within the next year anyhow.

TO: Was that a pretty big...

END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

OO: Well I'd say there was a pretty fair number, not a large number, no, not a large number. No, there were not a large number.

TO: That's interesting.

OO: But there wasn't the same onus on the socialists let's say in the period, in the period of the earlier '30s. You've got to remember it starts with the Dyes Committee business when they start naming everybody, we were still in the Farmer Labor administration, that's when all that [unclear] stuff is.

TO: Do you want to zero somehow on the Benson thing?

ST: Yeah, I'd like to get to that. Just starting to work for Benson, the kinds of things you did.

OO: Well when I went to work for Benson was to take that job in the State Highway Department and of course thing I found was that being personnel director didn't really mean that there was a bureaucracy in the Highway Department, within the state offices of the Highway Department and among the engineers that just had no sympathy at all to a Farmer Labor administration. They had tie-ups wherever the people supplying cement and gravel and all that kind of business and they were untouchable. On the other hand, though, one area we could control was the employment of common highway labor, the highway foreman, the sign inspectors and really it was a fringe activity and a patronage machine is what it was. Now as far as I was concerned, I would be over, looked over, hiked over the capital almost nightly and into Roger's office, we might sit down and talk with Benson or Roger would talk to me about this had occurred out in this county, this here and so forth and could
I have a look at it, which didn't mean I necessarily did personally, but I'd ask somebody to have a look. Sometimes we'd go over speeches that had been prepared for Benson or we'd go over a statement that was being issued, in other words simply discuss the kind of things that occurred. We had a period there in the Highway Department, in fact Jim tells about it in his book, so no need to go into it, but it's the, one of the funniest times I ever had was when the AFL bureaucracy came in to have me fired...

TO: They had gotten you the job I thought.

OO: I beg your pardon?

TO: I thought they had recommended you.

OO: They had in Minneapolis, but the international machinists particularly and the St. Paul leaders of the movement wanted me out. Why? Because the locals of the machinists and the highway shops had gone with the new UE and I recognized them, continued the contracts with them because they had won, all the locals had gone into UE rather than stay with the IAM, so they insisted that the contract was with the IAM and that the UE could not be recognized and I took a contrary position. It's told about in Jim's book.

ST: Oh, go into it anyway.

OO: And Elmer calls me up, you know the was Highway Department three miles, four miles from the capital and he says Orville I want you over here. I come over, and here's Bob Olson, president of the state AFL, George Lawson, state secretary of the AFL, Frank Starkey is there and silent.

TO: Cause he had been an old Farmer Laborite from way back...

OO: He been a socialist too, he was quite a guy. About a dozen of them there. So one of them starts making his spiel, Elmer immediately interrupts and starts sounding off. And I says Governor, let's hear the story. He says all right if you're so goddamned smart he says to me and he probably said damn smart, not goddamn. And so we listened to their story, I can't remember the details but it boiled down to we have no business continuing arrangements with the UE in these shops and I responded as I thought appropriately to their claims and all. And they demurred and insisted that I be fired. Elmer gets up from his desk and he walks around the room, points his finger and he says and you he says I know damn well what you took to take that contract from so and so, and you don't tell me I know what you did in such and such a case, and he had it, he had it cold, these labor [unclear] been pulling deals all around, just running around and of course he [unclear] there's no chance that they'd ever support [unclear] and he didn't need to do it, it was stupid, it was foolish but that's Elmer he had to lay it out the way he saw it, that's the way [unclear] and you couldn't stop him, no way of stopping him. It was a very foolish thing, these were powerful men, the representatives of the International of both the Hod Carriers and the International Machinists and the state leadership of the AFL.

TO: The AFL had supported the Farmer Labor in the beginning...

OO: Of course, of course, they were always a part of it.
TO: [Unclear] right, right.

OO: Sure, always a part of it.

TO: What, do you think that to what extent did the growth of the CIO kind of you know kind of competition and that's a good example, the machinist thing, contribute to the kind of the erosion of the base of the Party?

OO: It was a terrible split. You've got to remember, the simultaneous or virtually so was the war in Spain which split many many progressive liberal people down the middle. But the CIO - AFL split was very important.

ST: Can you give some examples besides that one of how it you know cam up.

OO: Well anytime you split, let's take the labor movement in Minneapolis or in St. Paul, you split it you've weakened the base of your Party activities.

TO: A labor party [unclear]. Well who was responsible for that, were some tactical mistakes made, did the CP make some mistakes in that regard, was there...

OO: With respect to the CIO and so on?

TO: Particular way it was handled, were the Trotskyists involved through the Teamsters and the AFL...

OO: Well the Trotskyists were involved of course, in fact they were outside the AFL then.

TO: Oh they were, that's...

OO: If I remember in that year they'd still be outside or just coming in, a year or two later. Were there tactical mistakes or strategic mistakes on the part, to what extent did the Communist Party contribute to the split in the CIO and AFL? I wouldn't...I'll bring it to Minnesota, I mean on a national scale it's clear enough I think that without the work of some of the leading communist organizers the steel workers would never have been organized as a classic example. And in that sense yes they contributed to a split, but...

TO: But they also organized workers.

OO: ...what was the outcome, who got helped. I don't think that in, I think that on the contrary or in the Twin Cities I would say that the Communist Party leadership tried to maintain connections with the AFL at all times and tried to encourage cooperation between the CIO and the AFL. I'm now talking of that period of the '30s.

TO: It fits in with their united front...

OO: What's that?

TO: It seems like that would be consistent with united front policies.
OO:  Yeah, it was, because there were well Roy Weir was organizer for many many years and later in Congress of the Central Labor Union in Minneapolis and certainly a conservative guy and a guy who incidentally ran a sweat shop on the side, but Roy Weir would never refuse to see say Schneiderman or Nat Ross or Carl Winter who were organizers of the CP at one time or another there. You'd see him sit down and talk with them, and of course if Clarence Hathaway came to town he could talk with anybody cause he was out of the Minnesota labor movement. Incidentally one of the greatest speakers I've ever heard.

TO:  Clarence, hey? Clarence Hathaway, it's too bad he's gone.

OO:  I heard him in Madison Square Garden one time, I'll never forget it. He had the capacity, the place packed, he'd talk in a whisper and people could hear him all over the place. He had that capacity for bringing points home. Excellent.

TO:  He wasn't in Minnesota during this period, then?

OO:  He was in...

TO:  In the Daily Worker...

OO:  In the '30s he was in New York, came back around '44 or '45.

TO:  Who were some of the leading, then who were some of the leading CP organizers, who you know who played the role in the CIO during this period.

OO:  Well...

TO:  [Unclear] might have a Nat Ross...

OO:  Who? Well I mentioned those were officials of the Communist Party, but in the labor movement and pretty well known at the time, one became a real renegade, Bob Wishart, UE 1045, 1145, [unclear] local.

TO:  Was he actually in the Party? I didn't know he was actually in the Party.

OO:  Sure he was and Hubert Humphrey knew it and he was one of Hubert's strongest supporters. Hubert got him to run for alderman one time and he, within weeks of the election period when Hubert called him in everything centered around Bob and says I've got the goods on you. Bob knew he had, he'd never denied it.

TO:  That's how [unclear]

OO:  But Ole Mossett, the machinist, also in UE, oh the guy who lived in New Brighton, Steve Adams, UE local [unclear] machinist, organizer in UE, there were quite a few of the guys.

TO:  There's one person we wanted to interview people about cause he was gone, can't remember now, that's not important. Well what about... But the CIO did organize...
OO: By the way you fellows are the smokers, not I, I promised [unclear] that I don't smoke except [unclear]...[Tape clicks]

TO: ...the shops that were already AFL I just gave an example of, how come they did that, is that what you call raiding or...

OO: Well it could have been in some instances, but let's take the machinists, all had been AFL and nationwide there was a split from the leadership of the machinist. The Machinist and Meld Trades Council had been notorious red baiters and bureaucrats who'd kept down the rank and file for years preceding the organization of the CIO so that was a very natural and early split in the labor movement. Sure it was raiding in the sense that the locals voted to go CIO.

TO: Right, it's just that in reading some of the Trotskyite stuff they make that charge, I'm trying to evaluate it...

OO: Yeah, well Trotskyist stuff written when?

TO: Well, in the Farrell Dobbs' books...


TO: Sure, but he documents that whole period and one of the attacks he makes...

OO: No he was one of the, I call, I've forgotten Nat Ross I remember had a name, a Russian name for Farrell Dobbs and he used to call Ray Dunn Piatikov after a revolutionary movement, Piatikov was one of the guys who was assassinated in the trials in '37 or something like that.

TO: What, okay, I'm just, this is back and forth, one of the things I don't understand, maybe you can help me out a little bit is that it seems to me that the AFL in Minnesota and it's a generalization, at least in the Twin Cities, some of the very founders of the Party were AFL people, Mahoney...

OO: Right, Bill Mahoney.

TO: Dan Lear himself, the socialist mayor came out after [unclear]...

OO: Dan Lear, right, yeah. Tom Lattimer.

TO: Okay, yeah, of course he was sort of, turned out to be a strikebreaker didn't he?

OO: Of course.

TO: Yeah, but was there...

OO: Socialist.

TO: Right, okay. Was that just a, a kind of a skin deep impression then of the AFL's progressive force or had it actually eroded over the years?
OO: It had eroded, the men had gotten old, they'd gotten corrupt. Been corrupted in 19, contracts with employers. George Lawson I recall at the time when the WPA was first starting, I sat in that old hotel on Superior in Duluth with him one night and I was very deferential and I said Mr. Lawson I says why does the AFL leadership here and you take a hand in organizing these unemployed and the WPA workers because it'll help strengthen the whole union movement. He says what can they contribute, he says they don't make enough money to live on as it is.

TO: [Unclear]

OO: That was, and I took it out for another Vice President state AFL-er, he's a Cuban cigar maker and kind of a king in the AFL bureaucracy, also in Duluth, he had the same attitude. They had no trouble making you know social engagements and associating themselves with Elmer Blue with the Duluth Northern Mesabi Railroad who handled the political contributions and relations with unions, relationships with new unions in the sense of keeping them out.

TO: That's interesting. Okay, so during the period of the Benson administration, the AFL which had supported the Farmer Labor...

OO: Right.

TO: Was alienated by...

OO: The top leadership was alienated, there was a split in the Trades Assembly in St. Paul and a split in the Central Labor Union in Minneapolis and also one cannot forget that you had a period of virulent anti-Semitism, very very bad. I once got after Carey McWilliams, are you familiar with Carey McWilliams' books, Brothers Under the Skin and...

ST: Oh yeah.

OO: ...and some of these other books, and he talks about Minneapolis and St. Paul and he speaks of anti-Semitism in Minneapolis because Jews did not get into the Minneapolis Club or the Minneapolis Athletic Club, whereas in St. Paul they got into the University Club and the Minnesota Club and so on. But Carey McWilliams didn't know was that in Minneapolis Central Labor Union if a guy got up and made an anti-Semitic remark, somebody's gonna come up there and knock him on his ass. In Trades and Labor Assembly in St. Paul on the contrary you had open anti-Semitism on the floor. [Unclear] these differences. The garment workers were a progressive force, I'm now talking about the Amalgamated more so than the International Ladies Garment Workers.

TO: What were some of the shops like that they had, be like...

OO: The shops that they organized?

TO: In this area.

OO: Oh, let's take Butwin's Sportswear in St. Paul which is a big one. I would say all of them on 1st Avenue North in Minneapolis.
TO: Yeah, Munsingwear, was that one?

OO: Munsingwear they had a hell of a fight, I don't know if they ever got it organized.

TO: Yeah, it is now but it's not much of a union. That's, that's...

ST: What were some of the other differences between the St. Paul and Minneapolis, both the labor movements and say the Farmer Labor Party as you saw it?

OO: Well I think the Farmer Labor Party in Minneapolis tended to be more ideological than it was in St. Paul. I think when the labor movement in St. Paul got behind somebody for Council, or Mayor, or Congress, I think they were effective really, but it wasn't an ideological basis. A guy like Johnny McDunnal, very popular, very nice guy, but certainly had no political theory at all, could get re-elected mayor time after time, get elected to Congress one time. Of course Mahoney in the background with political ideology, Frank Starkey did, Frank was elected to Congress. I think if Frank had tended to business he could have kept on being elected.

TO: Yeah, did he, so he's remained a progressive pretty much, Starkey?

OO: Funny he was usually identified with the right wing, but basically he was a progressive guy. I remember in the platform fight in 1938 convention, I think Frank was chairman of the committee and I was the secretary and I'd been working on the drafts all night and everything else. Unfortunately Frank was stewed up the next morning, been drinking a lot and he had arranged with me that I should not, cause I was identify, all right he's a left-winger and all, that the proposal should not come from me, but he would make them, but he'd forgotten, I'm trying to give him the paperwork and he's too drunk you know to take them and work with them right. But basically I felt he was a honest guy, I know Elmer felt the same way about him, Roger felt the same way about him. He was an honest guy.

TO: What, could you talk a little bit about your attempts to strengthen the Farmer Labor Associations and did that work? Were you able to do it to some extent or what.

OO: I think we did it to some extent, but I think that also that we on the Left were, when we got out in the rural areas, probably tended to be too sectarian. We wanted to organize the downtrodden farmer. But the downtrodden farmer quite often might be an incompetent guy too and if he could latch on to getting some kind of a role in the Farmer Labor Party that might have a prospect of a job or something, they could take him away from what ought to be his real work, he would go to it. And we were probably too impatient with many of these small businessmen who could have been educated to a more progressive point of view.

TO: How did that show itself, by having too left of a platform or the platform didn't seem that left...

OO: No, I think the platform in itself would have been...

TO: Very radical, it didn't seem that radical after ’34.

OO: I don't think the platform itself would have been it, it had to be more of a willingness to
recognize that some of these small businessmen had had their own struggles, they had succeeded in business and all and their education was limited and all they needed was to be better informed and I think we tended too quickly to dismiss them as a lost cause.

ST: What would you do when you went around, or you know, to try to strengthen these clubs, like what would be some of the activities, or how would you approach it?

OO: Well I think that number one of course we would try to find some, one of the issues which was particularly important to the area and try to get the what organization you had to enlist in a campaign whether it was the business of getting letters to the legislature or a local representative in Congress or go to the Board of Commissioners or whatever it was to broaden the activity. I think that another very serious error was made on the part of the Left in 1937-38 period. There's no denying that the fight in Spain was important to all of us, but for many people it was a remote area, they didn't know what the hell it meant and to make that a big part of a presentation of the Farmer Labor program was a mistake.

TO: And you did?

OO: And we did.

TO: I mean through what mediums?

OO: Group speeches, Elmer Benson's own speeches. Of course I recall I was down to Austin, Minnesota to give a speech to a Farmer Labor Convention, it was a big crowd, county convention, big crowd, and I quoted Harold Ikkies who had spoken in Chicago about a week before and Roosevelt in his attack on the Mussolini and Ikkies on his attack on the Germans and Italians for their planes over Spain and so on. The next morning the Governor's office was flooded with calls and wires protesting my speech. Demanding I be fired, I had no business giving that kind of a speech down there, they could have been, you know I gave it too much time.

TO: What were the protests based on, they disagreed with what...

OO: Well, disagreement mainly. First of all, just plain anti-war isolationist sentiment, you know afraid of involvement. Second the religious question, and third you've got the Dyes Committee active at that time and anything that associated Farmer Laborites with the position the Communists had taken was a terrible [unclear]

ST: So the isolation was a big factor?

OO: Oh, isolation a big factor, no two ways about it. True among the Germans, true among the Scandinavians.

TO: That's interesting.

ST: What other things like did you do in terms of trying to educate people into being good Farmer Laborites?
OO: Well, I think that of course in the Minnesota Leader, you're familiar with what they, there were pamphlets from time to time, like a fellow like Johnny Jacobson, Walt Sassman, Henry Tigen went to Congress and others, would go out you know to county conventions, county meetings and so on and would talk of the importance for example of public ownership of the utilities. For a more, a tax system which would prevent this evasion of taxes on the part of the wealthy. For the breakup of the trusts and the big corporations. I can remember many a time when I would come to a meeting and I would put on the table nothing but a bunch of newspapers and newspaper clippings and I would have clippings from the New York Times and the local press and from the business section which most of the people just had never read, I'd read from it, but I'd ask them a question and then they'd come back with questions, and do no more than that and here it's a whole evenings education.

TO: Yeah, yeah.

ST: Was it mostly speeches or did you get into, like for instance I'd read somewhere that they had like started getting into slide projectors...

OO: Very little of that, I don't recall, in fact I can't recall one instance, I mean can't recall an instance.

ST: So much for my article about the innovations.

OO: I don't suppose I should be really critical, it was successful in the sense that it defeated the Republicans for the Governorship, it helped us elect at one point we had nine congressmen and two senators, you know, it worked, but it had its weaknesses, it didn't help build a democratic, ideological base for the Party.

TO: Yeah, I agree with that. Well what, can you talk a little bit about this whole Mexican General thing that started happening?

OO: Well they, the newspapers and particularly Joe Ball that was his...

TO: Yeah, he became a Senator later on.

OO: Yeah, that was his particular, incidentally you know his background is interesting. His father was a socialist, his father was very very hard up, I would not of course want this kind of thing said but
Palmers told me the story, his father had to go on relief when Joe was a political writer for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Elmer called him in one day. And said Joe what the hell happened to you and Joe says Governor I know on what side my bread is buttered, just that simple. Enough of that around. I passed up a question.

TO: Oh it was the Mexican general thing, that was...

OO: Oh, it was really built around, in Floyd Olson's administration, there were certain guys who were presumed to be doing the fundraising and handling lobbyist funds and so on and so forth, there was Jake Pearlove, p-e-a-r-l-o-v-e, Jewish, Art Jacobs, secretary to the Speaker of the House, Abe Harris, editor of the Minnesota Leader, Roger Rudgeck who was in the attorney general's office but then became Benson's secretary, and each of them was supposed to somehow be associated in the business of collecting on gravel contracts and all that sort of thing, taking lobbyist's money and that they were the real bosses of the Farmer Labor Party, that Floyd was apart from them, Elmer was apart from them, that these were the real McCoy, they were the people running the Party.

TO: Right.

OO: Now Pearlove had nothing to do as far as Benson was concerned, Art Jacobs no connection with Benson. Now Abe Harris and Roger were very close and two guys farther from ever taking dole or being associated...

END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

OO: ...when the high offices and no real armies but they were running the [unclear].

ST: Did that hurt a lot?

OO: Oh yes, yeah, and you know you probably saw that communist or catspaw pamphlet, and the newspapers like it, it had a lot of effect, no two ways about it. Remember this is the era of Coglin too and Lempke. But...[unclear]

ST: How did you try to handle that?

OO: Well you know you tried, for example at one level you saw to it that paperbacks of Mike Gold's Jews Without Money got into the hands of more people, you tried to talk with particularly with some of the Methodist and Presbyterian Unitarian ministers, get them to speak out, it was tough to handle, very tough. It was, you have to remember too that at that period the national leadership of the Communist Party, we had the Red Scare at the same time, was heavily Jewish, organizers who'd [unclear] come in the Midwest states, where were they from...

ST: New York?

OO: They were from New York and they were Jewish, they were bright kids out of Harvard, Columbia, City College and so you have that linkage of Jews and Communists and Jews and big
money you know it's...

ST: Strange that they'd [unclear]

OO: Look I think of my mother's folks, her brothers living on the farm and in a small town, Adrian, Minnesota, 1100 people and I used to be puzzled as a kid, I'd hear them refer to some guy as a 'white Jew', and the only Jew they ever saw was a peddler who'd come around, but he was always a white Jew, why, cause they liked him, he was nice. But somewhere there'd been planted that the [unclear] the Jews were something else.

ST: Do you remember any specific instances that you know this kind of thing blew up into an incident or took its toll you know...

OO: Blew up into an incident? No, I don't recall that, I think you know that there was tremendous pressure for Elmer to fire Rutcheck, that the Jews wanted him out of there.

ST: They did?

OO: Yeah because they'd feared that this was encouraging anti-Semitism. I think Jim has it in his book, Judgments Day, with [unclear] Floyd's secretary, and George Leonard who had once been a socialist, now then wealthy attorney, called me to a meeting at the Gimmel Dalad Club for lunch. Abe Harris had called me to [unclear] be sure to be there and Judge Day had called me and the whole purpose of the meeting with the Jewish businessmen and this was their club was to talk to me about persuading Elmer to let Roger go. They in turn would back me for the secretary's job. Abe Harris mind you of all people thought perhaps that was the way to go, he was so fearful of anti-Semitism.

ST: That [unclear] any difference would it [unclear]

OO: Of course [unclear]

ST: He can't...

OO: Wouldn't of changed anything cause Abe had kind of a block on this subject. I'll tell when I was first [unclear] in the Highway Department Abe must have had, he must have given me the names of a thousand Germans who should be employed to counteract this anti-Semitic, just always after me, he could never have enough.

TO: How about among ethnic groups in Minnesota, was there any, were Germans more anti-Semitic than anyone else, or did it cut across lines pretty much of Catholic, Jew, or Catholic, Norwegian...

OO: Well I would say we found it in the Farmer Labor movement more in the German Catholic communities than elsewhere, not that it didn't exist elsewhere, believe it existed but more, it tended to be more virulent there. And it's not too unnatural, remember they'd been against World War I and our participation, you were in the throes of people developing an anti-Nazi feeling or at least in Washington, an anti-Nazi feeling, a feeling against Hitlerism and so on and as far as the Germans were concerned in Minnesota this was just bringing back World War I. So it's not unnatural that it should have been stronger there than among other groups.
TO: Is it, do you think too [unclear] the reason for the German loyalty to the Farmer Labor Party was primarily because of the [unclear] the Republican administration on the German community during World War I, that the Farmer Laborites [unclear]

OO: [Unclear] a factor, and there were many German Socialists in the Non-Partisan League.

TO: But at least it would seem that the Germans had less of a tradition of socialism than the Scandinavians did.

OO: That's true, yeah.

ST: Okay, what kind of a guy was Roger Rutcheck, can you talk a little about him.

OO: Well he was my, as far as I was concerned the best. Roger was about five years older than I, have you seen pictures of him?

ST: No, I don't think I've seen pictures...

OO: Short, very short guy, brilliant mind, worked his way through the University of Minnesota, the only man who ever got a degree out of the University of Minnesota without taking compulsory military training, he was the boy orator when LaFollette spoke in the St. Paul auditorium in 1916 or '17 against the war, he was the boy orator. He would work literally, I hear all this bullshit about [unclear] work. Roger would work until 3 o'clock in the morning and be down in the office about 9, worked constantly, absolutely loyal. Read all the newspapers, read them thoroughly and had a habit of clipping. He had stacks and stacks of newspaper clippings and I'd be given a clipping, somebody else'd be given a clipping to investigate this further, to write on this, do this, do that, he was absolutely tremendous. Now he had a very dour[?] manner, he wasn't the outgoing type of guy who could really welcome the delegate from Kandiyohi County who had a small business, he was not that kind of a guy, he didn't have that easy manner. If that's off I'll tell you a story about the clipping. [Tape clicks]

TO: Family life during this period, I mean you must have worked pretty hard, right.

OO: Yeah, when I, well I don't particularly care to go into it but we busted up. I have four children of my own and I raised two others. My kids [unclear] vote liberal, my son was 26 on [unclear], he's an honest to god impressive guy, he was a hell of a good student. My daughter in Rome, philosopher, linguist, who had been apolitical, partly probably in revolt against me...

ST: Sure...

TO: [Unclear] a lot.

OO: However, her experience in the last 10 years in Italy has made a very good leftie of her, and that in itself is an interesting story. I'm sitting in an airport in Denver, kind of a guy who'll read the newspaper all the way through, in the religious news there's a story about an American girl having communion at her wedding in Italy and the Vatican had announced that this was not precedent for this ever occurring because she was a Protestant, [unclear] friends Barbara Olson.
TO: That's great. Italy's really interesting.

ST: On Benson...

OO: Yeah.

ST: His speeches and things like that, I'm just interested in general like did he write some of them, were all of them written for him or how much input did he have into...

OO: He would have input, the problem with him was to restrain him and to keep him [unclear] approaching the text. He was, generally a wooden speaker, no flair for speaking at all, but he would get on to something, God help you, he'd [unclear] that somebody at the steel trust, some individual or somebody representing Northern Pacific or, he'd even take on the Bishop of St. Paul, [unclear] St. Paul directly and you couldn't restrain the man, there was no way of stopping it. I had a very embarrassing time one time in Salt Lake City with him, this is back in '45, [unclear], he didn't realize a man was prodding him with questions was a drunk and Elmer was cutting loose, I've forgotten who it was on at the time, murderous, no need for it.

ST: So he didn't have the political savvy...

OO: No, the finesse [unclear], no...

TO: That's why I think a lot of people loved him for that too, directness.

OO: That's true, that's true, but it did him irreparable damage...

TO: I think on the Bishop...

OO: You know he did, what, he did crazy things in that sense you know, but you remind me of something else in relation to the left now. I'm speaking at a Farmer Labor picnic in Moose Lake and of course I'm announced as the director of the Personnel State Highway Department, a member of the Central Committee, so forth and so on, after, in the course of it I answer a lot of questions you know. After the meeting's over I'm besieged by township chairman, county chairman and so on about highway jobs and this, this goddamn foreman's no real Farmer-Laborite, he's really a Republican and so forth and so on. One guy stands, says I don't understand it Mr. Olson I applied for a job and so forth and so on, he tells me the story and he lists his credentials, he says and he says besides I'm a member of the Communist Party. He thought that was a guarantee to get a job.

TO: There was a chapter of the Communist Party in Moose Lake we're finding out, [unclear], Jacob Anderson I guess...

OO: Who?

ST: Jacob Anderson.

OO: I can't remember, I wouldn't necessarily have known any [unclear]...
ST: That's great.

OO: But that's illustrative of how the Communist Party sometimes worked I think.

TO: Let's talk about anti-Semitism and the fall-out with the AFL, how 'bout the whole anti-communism thing, you know the charge that people close to Benson were communist...

OO: Yeah.

TO: How did you handle that, would you do anything differently. To what extent were there actual Party members in the state administration as far as you're concerned, or as far as you knew.

OO: There were members of the Communist Party within the state administration, right, it did not include that we had Roger Rutcheck.

TO: Wasn't Chester Watson...

OO: Chester Watson was a communist, he was as close and as influential to Elmer Benson as you were.

TO: No, they made a big thing...

OO: I know you know Chester was a likeable guy and all but to think of him as having any influence on, in his own right, utter nonsense. Complete nonsense.

ST: How did you deal with that issue then?

OO: Well I'll tell you we used to quote most frequently Floyd Olson's speech of '34 I think it was, people still revered Olson, we used to quote Harelinky's[?]...

ST: What quote of Olson's...

OO: Olson's was something to the effect, you know this is communist but...

TO: I like it.

OO: I've forgotten it exactly.

TO: I've got that [unclear].

OO: How did we handle it. Usually by trying to state what the issues are, if the communists support this, that's their business.

TO: Were the activities of the communists themselves in terms of the way they related to the Party that caused needless animosities within the Party, that's one of the charges, I don't know if you read Naftalin's...

OO: No, by the way I want to get Naftalin's book.
TO: He said, a lot of what I want to write is going to try to be a response to that, cause that's still a standard, the only...

OO: Yeah, and I've never read it, I should read it, I knew him too. No, I, my criticism of the Communist Party in that period would be that they did not conduct an open Communist Party program of their own, presumably they had one on paper. But in terms of actually functioning as a Communist Party which you could see that was independent of the Farmer Labor Party, you didn't see it. I'd say the same criticism could have been made of the '48 campaign of Wallace which I thought was a mistake from the beginning, all that was...

TO: [Unclear] yeah...

ST: U-huh. How much like the rank and file that you met say out on these Farmer Labor Clubs, how much did you see the development of their ideology and their understanding of you know some of the ideological issues.

OO: Varied a great deal. You would get some tremendous surprises, you might go into the home of a farmer and in talking with him you would have had really no idea. You get inside his home and you might have found old Socialist tracts, the writings of Charles Lindbergh Sr., other, Bellamy, other Socialist writers and so on, you'd get to talking, you'd find they really had tried to study socialism, but did the people advance toward socialist thinking, I don't know, I don't know. I wouldn't now try...

TO: It seems to me that for a lot of people must have been a certainly kind of a changing or transitory thing because that memory was erased so quickly, the socialist ideology, whereas in a period of years there's no trace of it. And even though there's thousands of people, I never even heard about the Farmer Labor, grew up and all I knew was the Democrats.

OO: Where'd you grow up?

TO: I grew up in St. Paul.

OO: You did.

TO: Family's Irish, Irish Catholic.

OO: You didn't grow up in Minnesota?

ST: No.

OO: Where'd you grow up?

ST: Kansas.

OO: Kansas.

TO: That's, yeah that's...

ST: How 'bout the factions within the Farmer Labor Party, how did, or just like how did you view
the Farmer Labor Party, like if you were to sort of to say what it was and you know...

OO:  Well now if you're talking of the period following Floyd Olson's death for example...

ST:  That'd be a good place to start.

TO:  Yeah.

OO:  You were then talking of a Party which was beginning to split between the rank and file, people who wanted a rank and file left movement and people who wanted a practical political party that would win elections.  On the left you had the group following Henry Tagg and Elmer Benson, Johnny Bernard, although he picked up a little later perhaps.  And on the right you had followers of Hjalmar Peterson, the right wing bureaucrats of the AFL and in every county there'd be a struggle between the two groups.  The group on the left would be concerned with international affairs for example, would be concerned with supporting Roosevelt, strangely enough those on the right might be advocating a third party candidate for president.

TO:  Like who would be some mentioned?

OO:  Well, look, as recently as 1946 and you're talking about after the formation of the DFL, you have Art Naftalin and Hubert Humphrey and what was the committee woman from Red Wing, Eugenie Anderson and a group built around essentially around the Reuthers, meeting in Madison Wisconsin to consider a third party organization at a time when the crucial thing was to win the congressional elections and not get, not let the Republicans take over.  You had that kind of thing earlier.  Then there was the movement to the right when it was Elmer Benson and the left who rejected Phil LaFollette in 1938, it was the right wingers who wanted him and I was at that meeting, there were 12 of us from Minnesota.

ST:  What happened at that meeting?

OO:  Well that's where Phil tried to say oh the press has got wind of this meeting, they'd like a statement from you Governor on how you view this joining of efforts and the Governor says tell the press to go to hell, he says I'm not prepared to talk to the people of Minnesota, I talk to them first.  That was quite a meeting.

TO:  How did it, how did it break down socially or was there, or in terms of class-wise, between left and right, was there, farmers tended more to be in the right would you say?

OO:  No, I would not.  Small town businessmen tended to be in the right.  The AFL bureaucracy tended to be in the right.

ST:  Were you, did you go around into some of these local county level...

OO:  All during the primaries of '38 you bet.

ST:  What would you do when you, I mean to try to...
OO: Well, went to, you did some elementary things like making sure that your people were precinct clerks, that was one of the things you did. But mainly to you know identify the Farmer Labor Party with Benson and not with Hjalmar Peterson, as if Hjalmar Peterson were an outsider, not a part of the Farmer Labor Party.

TO: What were some of the circumstances with Hjalmar Peterson, do you think that he basically made his decision right in '36...

OO: Yeah, I think he made it in '36.

TO: When he didn't get to be Governor.

OO: Well, after all he became Governor in '36.

TO: Yeah well he did for a few...

OO: Yeah, and he wanted Benson to stay in the Senate and of course I think if Benson had stayed in the Senate at that time he'd have been there a long time, but the left and the progressive forces in the Farmer Labor Party naturally wanted to control the state [unclear], so Benson became the candidate for Governor and Lundeen for the Senate.

ST: Did that, did it reflect in the, the struggle reflect in the Party platforms on the local levels all the way up to...

OO: Yes, particularly to the extent that it dealt with international affairs or dealt with support of the Roosevelt administration.

ST: So those would be the two major platform differences.

OO: I would say so yes.

TO: There was both the left and, everyone seemed to be united on taking a step back from the '34 platform. You weren't around during the making of that, but that was pretty...

OO: No I would say that people except for Meridel LeSueur, boy wanted to step back from '34 platform. There's a tactical, on the part of the left, a tactical move.

TO: If you have a feeling it's the primaries started, do you think that Benson and those of you the closest to him, were pretty, appreciate the challenge for what it was and made your challenge.

OO: No, I don't think in the beginning it was fully appreciated and I think that Benson made a mistake and there were arguments pro and con. He retained in his administration in key jobs people who and other people in the field in the state administration who were supporters of Hjalmar Peterson, and might not open, wouldn't as a state official state so, but actually they were working for Hjalmar Peterson. I would cite George Griffith, he was [unclear] Commissioner, or...I don't know what we called the...
TO: I thought he was a Benson supporter but he wasn't.

OO: Well, he was [unclear], he was usually tied up with the newspapers too, part of the Mexican [unclear], but there's no question in my mind that Griffith and the people around him were closer to Hjalmar's point of view than Elmer's. Griffith was also an ex-socialist out of the Non-Partisan League of North Dakota. Or if not out of North Dakota, he was certainly associated with the group. I don't, I no longer recall exactly.

ST: Could you tell, like I know we talked about it at lunch, a little bit more about those Farmer Labor Clubs and what local meetings were like in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

OO: Well I can't speak with the same familiarity of the St. Paul locals as I can in Minneapolis. But in Minneapolis for example if there were a strike situation, no matter whether it was large or small, we'd have a speaker talk on it at the meeting. If there was a bill pending for the legislature, whether it was health, general social interest, we'd have somebody talking on that. We'd try to have education in that sense at these meetings and then political debate on resolutions to be offered to legislature, to the Governor, or to the City Council, whatever it was.

ST: And do you think they had a lot of weight? I mean was it truly listened to?

OO: I think it was listened to by Benson, in fact I know it was, I know it was. Now sometimes Rutcheck would get irritated, Benson would get irritated, because a Farmer Labor Club and often perhaps pushed by the communists within it or from outside, would take an extreme position on some issue which the administration didn't like to see identified with the Farmer Labor Party, that too happened.

TO: Yeah, right.

OO: Which is why I say that you know I think the Communists made a mistake in their own terms of their own Party and it certainly hurt the Farmer Labor Party that they did not maintain a separate identity.

TO: Yeah, cause people ended feeling like they were not being treated honestly. We were talking about that the other day, that whole way of operating groups, Naftalin makes a big point in his thesis, used the term undercover you know. I mean he just uses a certain language [unclear]

OO: Course Naftalin was a pretty late comer and I don't recall his involvement in the Farmer Labor.

TO: He wasn't, he was in Humphrey, he's one of that group...

ST: [Unclear]

TO: I mean it's an apology for passing his history. From, okay from the point of view of well, what do you think were the underlying reasons for the defeat, just from the average Minnesota voter [unclear], certainly somewhere there's the anti-Semitism, that must have had an effect; anti-communism must have had an effect. But wasn't, maybe even...
OO: Corruption...

TO: Corruption, people believed that...

OO: Believed it.

TO: Was there anything substantive in terms of the Party, you know, were these all just you know propaganda, or was there some ways the Party wasn't delivering for, wasn't doing a job...

OO: Well, let's take the thing, the corruption, not started with Benson, certainly not encouraged or tolerated by Benson, but no question about it there had been corruption known by Floyd Olson carried over and it began to spill out. There'd been that. There was the anti-communist hysteria and could be built on and, by identifying certain people in the administration or supporters of the administration who were known to be Communist or associated with Communists, no two ways about it. There was the isolationist sentiment which revolted at the thought of the Farmer Labor Party taking a position on the war in Spain and a position against Germany. These were all factors. You had the depression of course in '38...

TO: Economic downturn again.

OO: Right, it was an economic downturn for which Benson after all, our Farmer Labor administration had no responsibility, but they're going to feel the consequences, no two ways about it.

TO: And the Stassen candidates see could combine...

OO: And then the split in the labor movement and labor unrest, all these things were factors. And keep in mind too that in, whereas in the early '30s, in 1930 and '32 and '34, small town businessmen were suffering economically, hurting very badly, after Roosevelt had been in for one administration or more they were beginning to come back, they were making a living because there had been the ERA programs, drought relief programs, farm relief programs, so these guys reverted to being Republican.

TO: Yeah, that was true with [unclear] farmers too...

OO: I beg your pardon?

TO: That was true with farmers...

OO: That was true of farmers as well.

TO: So that farm base had, that part of the...

OO: No there's an interesting thing and people forget this about the '38 election, they always say rural Minnesota went against the Farmer Labor Party. It did, but analyze it, where did those votes come from against the Farmer Labor Party. They came from the small towns, not in the farming precinct. And any serious study will show that.
TO: That's good. So basically the...

END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO

OO: It wasn't a rejection of the idea of cooperation of Farmer Labor, no, I'd say no.

TO: So your own personal opinion and you obviously can't rewrite history, that Benson himself or whoever was Governor had been a little less antagonistic that possibly [unclear] wouldn't have happened?

OO: I think we'd have still been defeated, I think we'd have still been defeated. International affairs and the national-wide split within the labor movement, the depression of '38.

TO: Yeah, well all the progressives got wiped out across the country almost.

OO: Right, Murphy got beat, I think we'd have been defeated anyhow, but Elmer didn't help.

ST: Now you were involved in...

OO: The sad thing was of course that people like Tigen got, now if you'd have had a different governor or a man different from Benson, a Tigen in the 3rd District might have survived, a John Bernard might have survived.

ST: Yeah.

TO: Cut the losses.

OO: Even a Dewey Johnson in the 5th District might have survived, Frank Starkey in the 4th would have survived, it would have been, the Governor, candidate for Governor might have been defeated but a number of these congressmen could have survived I think.

TO: Yeah.

ST: [Unclear] point. Well and the Party could have maybe had a comeback then instead of...

OO: Right.

TO: Kept going downhill.

OO: Yeah.

ST: Now you said that you got involved in the talks for the merger with the Democrats and the Farmer Labor.

OO: Only in Washington.
ST: What was happening there then.

OO: Well there you had, oh it should be noted as a prelude to this that in 1938 unlike earlier years the Roosevelt administration did zero for Elmer Benson.

TO: In 1938.

OO: When he was defeated. They did nothing for him. As a matter of fact when Jimmy Roosevelt came through on a campaign train, a lot of Farmer-Laborites, so-called, and Democrats were a third party were invited to meet with him on the train and a social gathering and the rest of it. I think as a courtesy to the Governor he was invited but nobody associated was invited, whereas a lot of nobodies did get invited plus the right wing people in the Farmer Labor Party. I told Jimmy Roosevelt here about 10 years ago how he insulted us.

TO: Yeah, after all that support he got from Benson too.

OO: By the way, you know Elmer was not unaware of what was happening for example in the Highway Department and other departments and in the spring of ’37 asked me to go to Washington, go to the Dept. of Agriculture under the [unclear] Bureau of Public Roads, and asked them to name the best five highway engineers in the United States because he wanted to appoint a new Highway Commissioner and the only way he could get away with dismissing Ellsberger who was Floyd Olson's fair boy was to do it on some such level as that. And I go to Wallace's office and talk about it, and Wallace recalls why that would be politics.

TO: Boy people really took [unclear] with Wallace.

ST: What did happen there in Washington then when you were on that merger talks, at least to give a perspective from what was happening nationally.

OO: Oh, the Ewing, and let's see we had two Party chairman that period, but Ewing particularly was most active in trying to achieve the merger and he had to deal with Benson and he had to deal with the old-line Democrats and Humphrey who was on contrary to some of his biographical sketches, employed at that time on a WPA project still as a teaching aid or something of the kind, became kind of a spokesman for the Democratic Party remnants and also was picked up by right wing Farmer Laborites. So Ewing was dealing with the Benson group and with that group trying to bring them together, and all I can recall of the thing now is frequently being called up to the Carlton Hotel where he, Ewing is General Council of American Aluminum Corporation of America and a partner in the firm Charles Evan Hughes and Co. so, but none of that got [unclear] and he tended to favor the left wing party, Benson wing of the movement more than he did the Democrats and I suspect that being out of Indiana, a lot of that grew out of a remaining feeling from Klan days against the Catholic Party, that is, and I hope I'm not on here...

ST: You are, I'll make a note of that.

OO: I really do, because you know the Klan had been very active in Indiana and he tended to feel that the way to get the labor movement organized and the farm movement organized was to give more responsibility to the Benson wing than to the Democrats who had done nothing.
TO: You feel like the merger was a mistake looking back on it.

OO: No, no I think it was very desirable to re-elect Roosevelt, I think that contributed to his re-election. And I just look [unclear]

TO: Do you think by then the Farmer Labor Party itself couldn't really continue...

OO: Not...

TO: With any...

OO: No...

ST: Sort of a [unclear] question...

TO: Well how did you, after you became less involved, or you were not involved in politics through the '50s McCarthy era, how did you handle all that just you know personally, I mean here you'd been a real active progressive and then it wasn't [unclear] go on anymore you know...

OO: Well first of all I couldn't avoid becoming terribly involved in making a living with the big family I had and I was very much in debt. And I was pursued by the taint of radicalism and I had to be careful where I was employed because I'd get employed someplace and if the person became aware too soon of my background I'd be out of a job. I had an interesting experience in '49, in 1948 a prominent businessman in the Twin Cities offered me a job which at that time you know $9,000's a lot of money.

TO: Geez, yeah.

ST: A lot of money.

OO: In '49 I decided my God here I am in debt like this, instead of working in a political organization I'd better get myself a job and see if I can get out. Went to talk to the guy, he offered me a job co-ordinating the running of a plant he had that he had sons-in-law in who were running it into the ground. He offered me $65 a week, we compromised at $75 a week and I went to work.

ST: That much difference in just one year.

OO: Now it's true that at the end of six months he raised me to $100 and made me in charge, put me in charge of the whole plant, gave me a bonus at the end of the year but it was a bad business and incidentally I became the employer at that place of two guys who had their PhD’s from the University of Minnesota, one in philosophy, one in biology and they were pants pressers on the night shift, they needed jobs, refugees from the purge, needed jobs, got jobs there and it was the same way when I came out here, I used to get all the refugees from the National Maritime Union, the government...

ST: Did you ever become in your life you know discouraged or sort of disillusioned with progressive politics at any point or...
OO: I've become discouraged, I've, some, not disillusioned, I have very close friends going back 40 odd years who now think of their period of the '30s and their commitment at that time that they were sort of taken. I know and they know the best part of their lives were the years that they were working the [unclear], they know it too and I know it. Now, right now I'm troubled that among very fine young people, educated people, who can read and do read [unclear], one thing that troubles me, the lack of discipline, I don't see disciplined organization anyplace, that's the one that I, I just can't understand. Fine young people, well maybe you guys can make me feel better about it.

ST: I think things are changing somewhat. I think there's some rank and file union movements starting...

TO: Yeah, I think a lot of people who came into the... from the middle class background, [unclear] the anti-war movement or the counter-cultural thing, some just you know, there's two strains to that movement, you know, a minority that actually was and is progressive in the sense of year in year out quiet kind of work, it's not very demanding, and probably the majority of people who went through that kind of almost like adolescent phase and now are [unclear] but you know, I think there was a cult of undiscipline [unclear] revolt...

OO: I see all kinds of mistakes being made and I would read that there were things that we were very wrong about, we observed incorrectly and everything else, but I don't have any regrets, [unclear] oh no.

TO: [Unclear]

OO: And I still have a great deal of faith and hope in the American people you know, are going to make it, that the one thing and this goes back years and years, I've always felt we never paid enough attention to our American history. I've always felt that and that don't mean as window dressing from a radical point of view, but find the radicalism in our, in our own history, see, that I've never understood. Just never could...it probably accounts for the fact that there was some CP organizer at one time who used to refer to me as the, I was not apt to hue to a line and to think in a rigid way, if a group of people agreed on something, alright that's it, I had questions and so on and they used to call me the 'honest Trotskyite', cause I didn't know enough theory, I didn't know enough of the gibberish that went with the [unclear] sometimes.

ST: That, that reminds me of a question, just sort of your analysis again, the Trotskyist Party, what was their relation to the Farmer Labor Party and your dealings with...

OO: [Unclear] in the period of the '30s, and I was wondering if somebody was going to ask further about that...

TO: Right, yeah I forgot about that...

OO: You know there's no doubt that the Dunns did a marvelous job organizing, there's no two ways about it. No question but that Ray Dunn, Vince Dunn, good mind, very good mind, Grant I thought and Mickey were nothing but, well they really became hoodlums. Bill Dunn was quite a character, course he remained in the CP.
TO: I've heard that, Elmer referred to them as hoodlums too, is that, is there any basis to that?

OO: Yeah, I think there is, I think what happened is this. I'll credit them with devotion to a cause, political and union organizing. But I think that in the course of it they acquired, in the course of the trials [unclear] everything else, they acquired such a hatred for the Communist Party that they would make any kind of alliance to defeat efforts of the Communist Party since the Communist Party efforts were devoted to the Farmer Labor Party in great part, they would do anything. They made alliances with business elements, crooked elements, I don't think there's any doubt about it, certainly 544, or 574 became infested with crooks, I mean the Ferrati boys were brought in from Chicago that time, you had the murder of Corcoran, the murder of Bill Brown, you had the business in the dry cleaning business where payoffs and all the rest of it. I don't think there's any question but their connections with employers, liquor industry and the dry cleaning industry and the trucking industry, they made, they'd become corrupted. I don't say that Ray Dunn became corrupted, I don't say that, but I think that Grant and Mickey without question, I don't think Bill Brown became corrupted in the same way, I think that without question they did and Corcoran of course was always nothing but a right wing AFL bureaucrat, he'd never been any different.

ST: Right. It was because of the heatedness of their disputes...

OO: The feeling that their intent, and they hated Floyd too you know.

ST: I think that was, yeah, because...

OO: Now I don't say that Floyd was right, but they carried it against the whole organization, the whole concept of a farmer labor party.

TO: They would say and we've talked to quite a few Trotskyists that they felt that their goal was not so much to defeat the Party but get it firmly rooted in the working class by having more labor organizations...

OO: You know one thing, I think they did a smarter job, a hell of a lot smarter job among students at University...

TO: Oh yeah to [unclear] day.

OO: A much smarter job, and I can recall a couple very uncomfortable times I had, I was supposed to address for example there was a meeting of a union of clerks and stenographers and I spoke and they took me on, first on the international question and something else and boy they gave me a bad time and I was not equipped to handle it, no they did a much better job in that sense.

TO: Don't you think they had something going for them in terms of Stalinism, looking back on it now.

OO: Well I'm not quite sure how you put it.

TO: Well, well, there's...
OO: Was their rejection of Stalinism correct?

TO: Yeah, I mean, [unclear] obviously because of Trotsky and all that, that they had a real sensitivity to the purges that were going on you know and a real criticism of the course of the Russian Revolution saying that this is not socialism what's happening, what we've got is despotism. And one thing you know I feel about the CP after talking to so many people is that there was almost a tragic kind of inability to deal with what was happening in the Soviet Union. It's understandable but I think it really impeded the work of the Party here in this country.

OO: Well there's no question about it, there's a slavish adherence to the Moscow line whatever, you know, without any questions, there were no two ways about it. Now I think my own feeling always was that the Party in Russian had been correct in its line to build socialism in one country, I felt that was correct in the circumstances, at the time, and no question that Trotsky fought it not to, what means he employed, how bad he was in it, I don't feel that I'm equipped to answer but I did see what happened in Minneapolis.

ST: What is your, okay so we have the Socialist Workers Party and the Communist Party, what would you describe the Farmer Labor Party as, I mean in terms of its radicalness or non...

TO: Ideology.

ST: Its ideology.

OO: And let's take its heyday, right, and let us think of the association and not the all party group at all. Socialist in the Scandinavian and German sense of the past, should be social security, should be income taxes, should own the grain elevators, we should own the oil, we should own the coal, the railroads, the public utilities and natural resources. And if you put it in those terms and a person separated it from the word socialism, people in Minnesota accepted it.

ST: Cause it made sense.

OO: Yeah. Still does.

TO: Yeah.

ST: Was Floyd a socialist then, and was Elmer a socialist?

OO: Yes, Elmer was, I think Elmer was a great deal more impatient with the entrenched classes than Floyd of course and it's interesting because Elmer's after all from a more middle class background and banking associates.

ST: Well you think both of them were honestly radical rather than...

OO: Right, oh yes.

ST: On Floyd Olson there's been some...
OO: Well in the case of Floyd Olson I think he was honestly radical but I think that, so he wins the election in '30, wins it in '32, and he wins it in '34, but by '34 he'd begun to enjoy the fleshpots and the main thing was getting elected. And by 1935, '36, and as Tepla reports at one point, by 1935 Roosevelt was already talking about Floyd Olson as the guy who might succeed him after the elections of, in the elections of 1940, Floyd certainly was not unaware of the impact he could have nationally.

TO: Yeah.

OO: And you guys, I don't know if you've ever got the [unclear] from anyone, or maybe they've been recorded, I'm not sure they have been, but Floyd Olson was a powerful speaker, attracted people you know, I'll never forget some of the meetings at which he spoke and of course the funeral was such a demonstration never saw. People revered him.

TO: Yeah he was a great leader.

OO: And of course it was easy for him to establish a relationship with Roosevelt, they were, you know they both liked the same kind of life, they liked to womanize, drink and play with the big boys.

TO: That's true, the womanizing part?

OO: Oh sure, who Floyd? Morrie Rose used to tell this story, it's a true story, one night he and Floyd are both a bit swacked up, Morrie as a chauffeur for Floyd, more than a chauffeur, body guard and valet and everything else, and Floyd at that time, some gal on Dupont South, the houses were up above the street and it had been Morrie's practice always to stop the car two doors away from the house late at night, but Floyd was swacked up and Morrie didn't pay attention, Floyd walks directly and knocks on the door and a woman comes to the door and she says you get away from this house and so forth and so on. He says but Madame I'm Governor Olson, she says I know very well who you are and I don't want you to be seen at my house. He had approached the wrong house.

TO: That's great.

OO: He had no trouble you know socializing, and had the friendliest relationships with an Art Rovier of the steel corporation, any of the big bankers, you know he could give hell to, let's see I've forgotten there were two main banking groups in Minnesota and he could have Rutcheck and the rest of the attorney general's office prosecuting the hell out of one and playing ball all the time with the other one, he'd get them both along and [unclear] all good buddies. Terrific charm.

TO: Did he have much sense of what was going on with the kind of ruling, the ruling class or ruling group at this period of time, in terms of the way they adjusted to, I mean it seems to me that Stassen was the kind of you know the example of the mature, they finally figured out how to handle this Farmer Labor thing you know by [unclear] the reform route.

OO: Yeah he went the reform route and he was above politics, yeah.

TO: That was quite a switch from the Citizens Alliance only you know what six years.
OO: Yeah, and after all he could be very advanced in certain things. I think that fairly early he identified himself with such things as mental health, I don't recall that he did anything about it, but, and you know other good causes that were fairly safe.

ST: What do you think you learned the most from that whole experience of the '30s about organizing people or you know working with political parties, or any sort of lessons like you say in the history, lessons from the past, from the '30s that we could apply to today.

OO: Well, gotta learn to not underestimate people because for example they lack education. It's one thing I think we could learn, I think the other thing that strikes me is that if we're going to have a genuine movement for progressive goals we have to be a great deal more disciplined in our organization of people and our efforts to educate them. I think a third thing of which I've become aware only in the last few years, curiously enough it was a sentence out of something that Lenin once wrote in a letter, a lot of us lefties of those days left our families behind; our parents, our brothers and sisters, where they were committed. But I think we detached ourselves with, from some of our roots, important roots and whatever the position of our parents, our relatives had been, whether in progressive in outlook, if they'd been educated, whatever it was, we failed in not retaining that connection. It helped a lot of people lose touch.

TO: Yeah, that's certainly true today with a lot of people.

You must be having to get back, I'm sure we've run you over.

OO: Oh yes, I'm [unclear], is that enough [unclear]

TO: Oh yes [unclear]...

END INTERVIEW