

Interview Log

Interviewee: Orlando Purnell

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George Meaney

BEGIN SIDE A

J.L.: My name is James Lane. This morning I will be interviewing Mr. Orlando Purnell at his home on Columbia Avenue in Crisfield, Maryland. Today's date is January the 12th, the year 2000. The name of this project is called My Soul Looks Back in Wonder, an oral history, investigation and exploration of the African American community on Maryland's Eastern Shore. We are indebted to Mr. Purnell for this interview since he has extensive knowledge of the seafood industry as well as labor unionism along Maryland's Eastern Shore.

This morning our interview will focus on unionism in the seafood packing industry in Crisfield, Maryland, and as well as other Eastern Shore communities in Maryland. Good morning, Mr. Purnell.

OR: Good morning, Mr. Lane.

J.L.: What have been your experiences with labor unions?

O.P.: Well I guess that we would have to go back from the beginning. I first became interested in labor unions watching my father work for a man for nearly 30 years without ever getting a paid holiday or a vacation, and no medical insurance, and I was determined that that was not going to happen to me. So as far as the union is concerned, I think, like I said to go back to the beginning, unions were organized for one thing, to organize the unorganized. There were many people who resented unions and tried to prevent it, as a matter of fact. They tried to break them up. But they seem -- some people had a way of seeing that this was going to happen anyway. And for many people, the people began to have faith, and the unions grew.

J.L.: You mentioned your father. What type of working conditions was he experiencing that it affected you so much that you decided that you would be involved with labor unions?

O.P.: Well just some of the things that I mentioned. He had absolutely no job protection. He had no benefits of any kind. And I would say that his job was just a step above slavery.

J.L.: What type of work was he doing at the time?

OR: Well he would haul barrels and boxes from the seafood people to pack their produce in, and he never missed a day's work or anything like that. He's very loyal to his employer, not to receive any loyalty from his employer.

J.L.: What years are we referring to when your father was working?

OR: I'm referring to mainly the 30's, 40's and 50's.

J.L.: He was providing for a family during the depression?

OR: Yes.

J.L.: Were you the only family member at that time?

OR: No. As a matter of fact, I had a brother and a sister, two sisters. And I can honestly say that he was a great provider. As a matter of fact, I've heard stories about the depression that some people went hungry and barefooted, but fortunately, it never happened to us.

J.L.: What would have been the primary occupation of most people in Crisfield during the depression?

O.P.: Well actually the seafood was completely dominated by -- Crisfield was dominated by seafood, and there might've been a few other jobs, but back there then, seafood was the predominant industry in Crisfield.

J.L.: What were the conditions within the packing houses prior to labor unions coming to organize the workers here?

O.P.: The conditions in packing houses were appalling. Actually, some of the people were not even getting paid for what they did. As a matter of fact, they would take their measurement of a gallon to their own discretion. In other words, what I think is a gallon is not what really is a gallon. And it was very -- some of the places had no heat in the winter, and no coolness in the summer, and they worked under what you might call the worst conditions. And back there then, they didn't have anything like OSHA, or lots of the buildings were even unsafe.

J.L.: What brought the packing houses to the attention of the labor union? Were there individuals who were responsible for inviting the labor unions here to organize the laborers, or have they been -- was there an actual grassroots movement within the city for labor unions?

OR: No. As a matter of fact, we had a person to leave here and go to New Jersey. His name was McKinley Jones. And he told this gentleman about the conditions here, and the gentleman asked him would people be willing, you know, to join a union and get out of this problem that they have here. And he said most certainly so. So he came here, and a lot of the people signed, you know, signed the cards.

J.L.: What year would this have been?

O.P.: This was in the 30's.

J.L.: And Mr. Jones, was he employed in New Jersey at the time?

OR: No, he was visiting at the time.

J.L.: What city in New Jersey?

O.P.: Port Norris.

J.L.: So he was aware that there were better working conditions and fair wages for employees in New Jersey than there were in Maryland?

OR: Oh, yes.

J.L.: As the result of that, he invited them to Maryland. Did he accompany them here?

OR: No. As a matter of fact, they came down for a look-see, you know. As a matter of fact, they came sort of incognito because they know the problems that people had when you mentioned union people, you know. And believe me, there was a problem too because there was one union person came here, they burned his car up, you know, overturned his car and burned it up. And in several other places, they've been beaten, and run out of town and that sort of thing. So people were very careful, you know, before they revealed themselves who they were. The point was to get their foot in the door first. And then you can say that I represent the union.

J.L.: Who was responsible for directing the labor organizer and giving him some sense of what was occurring in the town?

OR: Well he came here and he asked around, and I think one man sort of stood out with this, and that would be Mr. Albert Bell.

J.L.: Was Mr. Bell also exposed to labor unions in New Jersey as Mr. McKinley Jones had been?

O.P.: No, no, no.

J.L.: Did Mr. Jones ever share his experiences with the union organizers in New Jersey with Mr. Bell, you know of, or can you recall anyone ever speaking of them collaborating?

O.P.: I really don't know. I do know that after the union organizer came here, you see Mr. Jones was not as articulate as Mr. Bell. And Mr. Bell more or less filled him in on the details of what went on here. The main, the main question what Mr. Jones was getting the union here, and from there on they had people here that fill him in on the details of what really goes, you know, what really went on here. And it sort of evolved from there.

There were cards signed. And first the employers here did not even want to recognize the National Labor Relations Board. You know, when you get the cards signed, then you're entitled to an election. And then if you get enough people for instead of against, then you've got a union. It's as simple as that. And they did not want to recognize that at first. And they seen that if they didn't comply, they would have to pay a fine. So finally they signed the union contract.

J.L.: So the 1930's to the early 40's was a period of active unionism organizing in Crisfield?

O.P.: Very much so.

J.L.: And this happened as a result of the National Labor Relations Act and a new deal?

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Had that not occurred, would there have been any other initiatives on the part of laborers here to combat the working conditions?

O.P.: I'm not quite certain I understand the question.

J.L.: You had shared with me earlier that the working conditions were appalling.

O.P.: Oh, yes.

J.L.: Were there other advocates of better working conditions who were not aware of the unions, or had taken it on themselves to speak against those conditions prior to union organizing?

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Were there any individuals that were activists?

O.P.: Oh, I see what you mean. There were people who spoke against them. As a matter of fact, there were people who were threatening to walk out, you know, sort of a wild cat strike. But unions provided a better way than that, you know. The unions provided a way that you could go in legally, you know. If the union calls a strike, it's legal. But unless they do, you're wildcatting, and a wild cat strike is illegal. So oh, yes, they were very much sick of what was going on inside the packing houses.

J.L.: How did Mr. Bell become affiliated with the union as opposed to Mr. Jones contacting the union in its earliest stages and bringing them to Crisfield to investigate?

O.P.: Mr. Bell acted more in an official capacity than Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones was not, like I said, Mr. Jones, by just talking, was able to get the union here. You know, he just mentioned that. You know. But Mr. Bell was more or less, he was well known, and he talked to people and he was a good organizer.

J.L.: It's well known in labor history that a lot of organizing occurred in the social setting of churches or with small social clubs.

O.P.: Yes, indeed. Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Was this the case for the union?

O.P.: It was done in churches, town halls, you know, like the old Elks down there, and they had different places, you know. Matter of fact, before they got a building of their own, they used to use the Elks home for union meetings, or any place that was available. And they got together, and after a while, they elected officers. As a matter of fact, Melvin Tyler was one of the -- he knew a lot of the packers. He was able to talk to them, you know, and he became a good union person for that particular time. And everybody, including Melvin and Albert Bell had come up through the ranks, you know. They worked in the seafood houses, and they see what -- they'd seen what went on.

J.L.: Were there other prominent personalities involved with Local 453 which was the Amalgamated Meat Packers and Butchers Workers Union Local here in Crisfield?

O.P.: After the unions established, they appointed officers, they had the trustees, and the vice presidents and, you know, so forth. As a matter of fact, Bell was the first president, Melvin Tyler was secretary treasurer. And I think Mr. William Worton was vice president, and Lance Copin was recording secretary.

J.L.: What role did the women play in the union apart from being officers? Especially in the packing houses, were there prominent --

OR: In the packing houses, they were --

J.L.: -- female leadership in 453?

O.P.: Oh, yes. They were called stewards. Each crab house had its own steward. You know. She was sort of like the liaison between the packers and the union. In other words, if they had a problem, if one of the workers had a problem, then she stands with the worker, you know.

J.L.: When you inherited the mantle of 453 from Mr. Bell, what was the condition of the labor union, the local labor union here in Crisfield?

O.P.: When I inherited -- well actually, Mr. Pride was president after Mr. Bell died, Pride Collins.

J.L.: What year was that?

OR: Mr. Pride died in 1977.

J.L.: And you came into office in 1977?

OR: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: What month?

O.P.: September.

J.L.: And how long was your tenure?

OR: Up until -- well maybe I'd better go through this in steps because I think I explained this to you before, but up until 1980, '79 or '80, it was Local 453. After we merged, we became Local 27 because we merged with the hospital union. They had 500,000, we had 400. We had a little over 400,000, 450,000 meat cutters. So Amalgamated joined together, and we became -- after a while, we had over a million members. You know, I mean across the country, you know, meat cutters and --

OR: And which -- when you said meat cutters, what groups of workers did that include? Not only packing house workers, but were there other specialties --

O.P.: Oh, yes.

J.L.: Could you name a few others that were involved in the Amalgamated Meat Packers and Butcher Workerman's Union affiliation?

O.P.: Oh, yes. You take Campbell's Soup.

J.L.: Okay. What about nationally? Can you name some national affiliations and what particular work categories were the individuals in? For instance, you had meat cutters and packing houses in Chicago, Omaha, Iowa, Texas.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: But they were specialties, they were probably different occupational specialties that were organized, even though they were all a part of the meat packing -- PWOC, the Packing House Workers Organized.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: And there were different groups of people that were involved in that actual union. What would have been some of the professional occupations? For instance, in Crisfield, you had seafood laborers. But in seafood laborers, you also had -- you had the packers themselves, you had the crab pickers, you had the oyster shuckers, you had the barrel -- the men that put the seafood on the tables. They all had a title. So what I'm trying to ask, were there other types of occupational specialties that were in the national affiliation of packing house workers other than just seafood laborers, if you can recall or name a few?

O.P.: Well I imagine there were warehouse people. And, of course, there were people who were sanitation people.

J.L.: They would have been organized also?

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: That's interesting.

O.P.: You know, in the union -- in unions, it doesn't mean always that, like meat packers doesn't always deal directly with meat. There are other factions here, you know. Matter of fact, hospitals are in Local 27, you know. Plus right now, United Food and Commercial Workers Union is the largest union in the states other than teamsters. Teamsters is the largest. But it's the second largest union in the country.

J.L.: The meat packers union, or the UFCW?

O.P.: UFCW.

J.L.: Okay, which means United --

O.P.: Food.

J.L.: -- Food and Commercial Workers Union.

O.P.: Right, Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Okay. When the two unions joined together, was that due to membership decrease or national conditions of labor unions in general?

O.P.: Local 453, when we merged with Local 27, we were on the decline. As a matter of fact, seafood has been dying now for the last 20 years.

J.L.: So are you saying the seafood industry in particularly was the cause of the merger?

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: And not other conditions locally, state-wide or nationally --

O.P.: No.

J.L.: -- that resulted in a merger?

O.P.: Actually, when I came into office, we had 10 crab houses. We're down now to three. We had eight oyster houses. We're down now to one, that's Metompkin's. When I came in office and I seen the decline like that, and from there on, we just continued to go down. And not only that, our young people did not take -- did not, you know, shuck oysters, you know, like some of their -- you take today, the average oyster shucker is 60.

Oh, there are younger people who shuck oysters, but if you're going to put it on average, they're somewhere in the 60-year-old bracket. And it's just an industry that failed because of greedy people. And I say greedy people because the packers themselves, they made -- whatever money they made, they stuck it right down their pockets. They didn't spend anything, they never put anything back in their business. You take, like Mrs. Paul's came in here with frozen fish, which all these people could've had.

J.L.: Can you explain who Mrs. Paul's Kitchen was? Because someone else may know, you may know, but someone that listens may not know who Mrs. Paul's Kitchen was.

O.P.: Well Mrs. Paul's Kitchen was a company with a Philadelphia base. They put a plant here in Crisfield, which eventually was bought by Campbell's Soup. Mrs. Paul's was bought by Campbell's Soup. But they made all kinds of different types of variety of foods, like shrimp, fish, crab cakes.

J.L.: So the emphasis was on specialized packing of certain types of foods?

O.P.: Yeah. Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: For national distribution?

O.P.: Right.

J.L.: And that was also organized under the United Federation of Commercial Workers?

O.P.: Yeah. And when they closed up, that finished the union completely here.

J.L.: What year did Mrs. Paul's Kitchen close?

O.P.: March 1990.

J.L.: So from the period of 1973, '74 up to 1990, there was an active union here?

O.P.: Oh, yes.

J.L.: And that union was responsible for organizing labor that had previously been involved with the packing house seafood labor as well as other areas of food production.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: When the decline began to occur, what was the response of the national labor board or labor affiliates? I recall in the earlier years of 453, there was constant contact between national representatives as well as local representatives. And there was a constant line of communication happening. This occurred through your business agent --

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Through personalities going to conventions and conferences.

O.P.: Oh, yeah.

J.L.: So what was the response of the international to the decline or the obvious loss of importance of the labor union here in Somerset County or in Crisfield in particular?

O.P.: Well naturally, they were concerned, but there was very little they could do about it, you know.

J.L.: Do you recall any of the responses that had been communicated to you personally either through conversation or through written communication?

O.P.: Oh, yes.

J.L.: What were some of the things they would have said about --

O.P.: One thing they asked us were there other things in the area that they thought might need them? I said no -- you know.

J.L.: They said other things, meaning other --

O.P.: Other businesses.

J.L.: -- businesses. For potential organizing?

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: Or for membership increase?

OR: Yeah,

J.L.: Is that the reason why they ask you that question?

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: What other things did they communicate to you, if any?

O.P.: Well mostly their projects were, you know, political. They did not, they did not quite understand, you know, how this could have happened like this. You see --

J.L.: We'll continue this on the second tape if you don't mind. Is that okay?

(END SIDE A.)

(BEGIN SIDE B.)

J.L.: This is the second part of a two-tape oral history interview with Mr. Orlando Purnell at his home in Crisfield, Maryland. We are currently discussing the response of the International Labor Union to the decline of the local in Crisfield, Maryland. And Mr. Purnell is going to continue explaining to me some of the responses he received from the international or the national union representatives. Mr. Purnell?

OR: At the time, the president of the USCW was William Winn. He wrote to me that he would -- he would like to come down here and look around and see if anything could be revived here. And he sent officials, he was unable -- actually, there was nothing to do. There was -- they really thought there was a lot of industry here, and there wasn't.

J.L.: How could they have been so ill-informed?

OR: Huh?

J.L.: How could they have been so ill-informed?

OR: Well, actually, they were -- you know, there are some people that when they, they have an ego, they think they can do things that can't be done. And so when they looked around, they had to agree with us that it just couldn't happen. The thing that really bothers me the most is the decline of the seafood, and the way we let it happen ourselves. Now you've been working with the Delmarva historical situation, and it is my opinion, my belief, and of course everybody knows that the marine biologists on the bay -- and there is too much commercial dumping in the bay. That is what's really killing the seafood, and the great deposits of oil and gasoline from the pleasure and the workcraft, and the carbon that suffocates the seafood. It is almost impossible for, you know, for anything to live in that environment. My experience from the bay is being here, working inside and outside, I've worked -- I worked on a barge, Todd brothers' barge, planting oysters for the state. That is a very unique experience. You plant oysters, and you go back and -- you plant shells, and you see `em grow back into oysters. And I have dredged oysters. And I think sometimes if there are certain things that we could do, like I do not like catching female crabs. That's another thing that's hurt the industry.

J.L.: And --

O.P.: The main thing that's hurt the industry. They're getting crab meat now from the Far East, Korea and Japan. The sovereign market is cutting the blue crab in half. This thing just couldn't resist it any longer.

J.L.: If we can digress a little, at the height of the labor union's prominence here in Crisfield, blue crabs were not a problem in terms of harvesting. Would that be safe to say?

O.P.: Yes.

J.L.: If that was the case, why was it so necessary for Mr. Win to come to Crisfield to investigate the potential of the labor union's -- the local labor union here, and the effect it was having on labor on working within the meat packing industries, or the seafood labor industries?

O.P.: I really wish I could answer that.

(OFF RECORD -- TELEPHONE.)

J.L.: When you received the news of the possible merger, how did you communicate that to the membership, and what was the membership standing of Local 453 at that time, or had you already merged with the hospital at that time?

O.P.: No. Actually, we told them before that we, you know, before we merged, and we told them why. And believe me, it's a good thing that we did, because we were -- we certainly started operating within the red.

J.L.: So you all merged in 1980 with Local 27 out of Baltimore?

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: And that was a union affiliated with the United Commercial Food Workers. And you said that you're glad that Local 453 did. Why was that?

O.P.: Because we were operating in the red, and we were subtly going down.

J.L.: Meaning that operating in the red was a result of not having membership as well as membership dues that were paid?

O.P.: Right. As a matter of fact --

J.L.: But has --

O.P.: -- people were leaving -- as a matter of fact, people were just leaving Crisfield, and people were trying to get where they could, like Ruberset (phonetic) or somewhere, you know.

J.L.: That's an interesting point that you bring up that probably hasn't ever been accounted for that because of the migration of the population to more promising job prospects, that also affected the stability of Local 453.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: In light of the fact that they were still -- the bay was still being harvested and there was plenty of seafood, and we're still talking about, well there were periods where there were declines in the seafood production.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Up to the 90's.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: However, that did not prevent people from working in the packing houses. Work was available.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Since work was available, how was the pay scale being adjusted without migration of potential workers or people who had experience working in the packing houses?

Because once you leave the skilled laborer like that, that means you either have to retrain a population or hire outside of the existing community.

O.P.: Well as far as crab pickers are concerned, we have the highest paid crab pickers anywhere, all up and down the shore anywhere. Cambridge, or all the other places that pick crabs. Crisfield has the highest paid crab pickers.

J.L.: Was that equally true for oyster shuckers?

OR: Yes.

J.L.: Their wages were comparable to what was being made elsewhere in Maryland --

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: -- as well as other states that were involved in seafood production.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: So it was true that their labor was comparable.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: So the pay was not a problem --

O.P.: No.

J.L.: -- for the union. It was just the fact that there were attractions that were more promising in terms of jobs.

OR: Yes.

J.L.: When you decided to correspond with the International representatives, what were the statements you made to them regarding what the membership felt about the merger? Had you canvassed the membership to tell them what was necessary, or was this actually an executive decision with you and your officers?

OR: Well actually --

J.L.: Or was it put to the membership?

O.P.: It was put to the membership. But we had a close vote on it. And you know there are people that are reluctant to change, you know, I knew it, the officers knew it, and I tried to be as open about it as I could. But there are some people didn't want it to happen.

J.L.: They did not want it to happen?

O.P.: No, they did not want it to happen simply because well we built this place, and this is our place and, you know, but what's the point? You're going to lose it anyway. From the way it's going, you're going to lose it.

J.L.: What was the current membership when the decision was made to merge?

O.P.: We had a little over 300 and some people.

J.L.: What has been the highest membership count for Local 453 prior to the merger?

O.P.: Well with all the oyster shuckers back then, that was way before my time, 'cause I was a kid.

J.L.: Have there ever been any statistics kept on the membership count, with the exception of 453 up to the time that you came in as an executive officer? If you'd like to estimate, that would give me some sense of --

OR: Well I know there must've been at least 500 people at one time. I know when I came, there was 323 people.

J.L.: I see.

O.P.: And then from then on, it started declining. People were moving away, or people were quitting, or people were going somewhere else trying to get a job. The --

J.L.: What brought about the name change? After having been Amalgamated Meat Packer and Butcher's Workmen Union, Local 453, then changing to the United Food and Commercial Workers, was that a decision made --

OR: Because they -- what we merged with was not completely in the food industry.

See we moved with the hospital, you know, like I said before.

J.L.: Why a hospital local?

OR: Huh?

J.L.: Why a hospital local union?

OR: Because --

J-L: Who made that decision?

OR: Our board of directors, and the executive board, they voted on it, you know.

J.L.: Can you recount who those -- some of those executive members were at the time they made that decision? And this was made from what city?

OR: This was made from -- this was made from Baltimore.

J.L.: Maybe I need to ask for you to describe how the hierarchy works in terms of how the labor *unions* gave out decisions from the top down to the local level, especially in the meat packing industry. You all dealt exclusively with an executive group out of Baltimore City, and not so much with the national representatives or international representatives. Who was above the union representatives in Baltimore? Who were they accountable to? Especially the decision, the decisions were accountable to whom? Even though they made decisions that affected the locals, but who did they explain their decision making to?

O.P.: Oh, the international, of course.

J.L.: And where were they located at the time?

OR: *Washington, D.C.*

J.L.: I see. And we're still talking about the UFCW?

OR: Yeah.

J.L.: United Food Workers and Commercial Workers.

OR: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Okay. And who was the presiding officer of the UFCW at the time?

OR: Jerry Manapace.

J.L.: Have you ever had the opportunity to meet him?

O.P.: Oh, yes. Yes, I've had dinner with him, he's been down here. We went out and had lunch, we've been over to the island together, you know.

J.L.: What was the membership of the United Food and Commercial Workers at the time that Jerry Manapace's position was an executive officer? What was the -- how many people were there?

OR: You mean how many people --

J.L.: It was the second largest union in the country --

O.P.: After the merger.

J.L.: After --

OR: After the merger.

J.L.: Okay. So they had merged.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: With whom? Who did Amalgamated merge with? Did they just change their name?

O.P.: Well, see, the name was changed. See the hospital unit, 627, was out of Baltimore.

J.L.: 627?

OR: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: So it wasn't 695.

O.P.: Or six something. I tell you the truth, I -- well anyway, I haven't, I haven't been quite clear to this day about how it got down to Local 27.

J.L.: The reason why I asked you that is because Amalgamated Meat Packers and Butchers Workmen Union collapsed one time in history, in 1922 it collapsed.

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: And that's because the strike breakers were black, and at that time, because of racial tension, there wasn't any possibilities of conciliation when they came in to fill in after the other strike breakers left. So as a result of that, there has always been a scar against Amalgamated Meat Packers and Butchers Workmen Union because they were considered not so militant. And then they resurfaced again. And this time they came under the PWOC, which was the packing house workers organizing committee. So they had a name change then. But later on in 1943, I believe, when 453 organized, you still were under the mount of Amalgamated Meat Packers and Butchers Workmen's Union.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: So I'm assuming that in certain areas of the country, meat packers had a different name, but they all knew that they were unionized for the same purpose.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: Okay.

O.P.: You know, one of the most satisfying things was when I was asked to speak to a group of seniors up here at UMES. At first, I was -- I don't know, I think I was awed, you know, by speaking to a senior class graduating from college. But then I said to myself what do these kids know about labor? You know, And I think I got some very good response from that, and I felt good about it because the kids seemed to be so interested, you know, about it. And I told them point blank that when they graduate, some of you will get jobs, and some of you won't, you know. Some of you will have to go through the job market until something comes along. And if you do, plan to join the rank and file.

J.L.: And how did they feel about that advice?

OR: They accepted it well.

J.L.: Were you convinced from your own experiences that you shared as a unionist and how you benefited as a result of that affiliation?

O.P.: Yeah, one --

J.L.: Were there any detractors, people who opposed?

OR: Oh, yes. There was one youngster that said that he heard we were communists. And I said well you're going to hear these things. If you want to get a good picture of patriotism, I said when Adolph Hitler attacked the Jews back in -- you know, started to persecute the Jews back in 1933, the first one that struck a blow to Adolph Hitler was George Meaney. He was head of the Longshoremen's Union. He instructed the Longshoremen not to unload German ships. This was the first blow striking Hitler by anybody, you know. And I said we have a constitution that says you cannot be an officer in this union if you are a member of any subversive organization who's willing to overthrow the government.

J.L.: But it's well known that the tremendous spread of unionism and its effect in organizing the rank and file was done by many men and women who were affiliated with the communist party in early history.

O.P.: Oh, yes. Well actually, look at all the people who would join the communist party, the movie stars and everybody. The only thing is back then, it didn't seem harmless at all to join. Some people (indiscernible) the Koreans running because they joined the communist party. You take people like Robert Mitchum, he was a communist. But right then, it seemed to be the okay thing to do.

J.L.: Yeah. I recall that members of Local 453 were required to take an oath.

O.P.: Oh, yes.

J.L.: Under federal legislation that they were not affiliated with the communist party.

O.P.: Right.

J.L.: How did many of the people feel about taking that oath?

O.P.: They took it gladly because --

J.L.: Were they aware of individuals, men and women -- and interesting enough, many of those men and women were black or African Americans who were in the labor union because they were communists. And they were very much activated to do organizing among the rank and file because the communist party had a very good track record and an excellent rapport with organizing. Were they aware of that, or they felt that in order for them to make in roads into the seafood packing industry and different things that they wanted, it was necessary to take that oath?

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: Or were there any that did not take that oath to your knowledge?

O.P.: Not to my knowledge. But I mean they will -- these things, like one fellow, he's talking about there were gangsters in the unions, and like one kid up there said he heard that there was a lot of corruption in unions, gangsters, and I said well I'll tell you this much. You want to talk about corruption, you want to hear about Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon? You want to hear about Marvin Mandell, the Abscan trials where these congressmen were caught taking money. I said let's put the cards on the table just to show what people will do when the money's right, you know. And --

J.L.: Were you able to share with that person the gains that had been accomplished by unions in this country?

O.P.: Yes, I did.

J.L.: What was his or her response to that?

O.P.: Absolutely positive. Because I showed them -- and there are people to this very day who don't get the kind of benefits that they really should, but I showed him the benefits that many people in unions are getting now like optical, dental, hospitalization, paid vacations, stock, you know, buying stock.

J.L.: Yes.

O.P.: All of these things have been brought forth by the rank and file. In other words, it's very few people are going to give you anything nowadays. The companies are certainly not going to give it to you unless you ask for it. They made money off of people. Some companies have not necessarily made money from their products, but a lot from labor, cheap labor. That's the reason why they were sent down there, they got a lot of Mexican labor, you know.

J.L.: Can you share with me what type of confrontations that you may have experienced as president of Local 453 during your tenure, if any?

O.P.: Oh, yes. You're always (indiscernible), in other words, sometimes even by your own people, like when the union came apart, they didn't realize why. I'm telling you here because of the financial situation and the lack of -- let me tell you this. I said you're picking crabs about three months a year now. How do you expect to operate a union? Can't be done. Now I understand how you feel. It's been here for a long time, and you feel like it should be here. But there is nothing to back it up. When Mrs. Paul's was here, we could've made it. But when they pulled out, that was it.

J.L.: What about resolving difficulties with employers and membership?

OR: Oh, well --

J.L.: Also handling situations that your shop steward may have reported.

OR: Well I always had to do that. I think the main thing, I learned a lot from this. One, to be humble; one, to be ornery, you might say. I think I told you about this guy sold these oysters. I'll give you an example. Boy. I had to get him out of that. I went there, I conned this man. Lots of times, I come home, I work nights from four to 12:30. Sometimes I get in bed around 3:30, 4:00. About 7:30 in the morning, Bobby Long calls me to come help at the plant, two of `em got fighting, and said if you can't solve it, I'm going to fire both of them `cause I'm mad anyway.

J.L.: This was during the time that Mrs. Paul's Kitchen was in Crisfield.

O.P.: Yeah.

J.L.: And I assume that Bobby Long was the supervisor of the plant?

O.P.: He was the plant manager.

J.L.: Okay. I want to make that clear for the record.

OR: So I go there, and there's a couple women that got fighting because a lady said she had a dumb dog. She's talking about the other lady's dog, and they got into it. So I told her point blank, I said do you all want your jobs? You know, I'm still half sleepy, you know.

(Laughter.)

OR: Do you want your jobs? Please.

J.L.: What was the first job you ever had?

O.P.: Huh?

J.L.: What was the first job you ever had?

OR: Let's see. Oh, I think the first job I ever had was with Norman Mason.

J.L.: What kind of work was that?

O.P.: Construction.

J.L.: And we're talking about what years? You obviously -- were you a teenager at that time?

O.P.: Let's see. I graduated -- well when I was a teenager, I did have offbeat jobs, you know. But I think I went to work, it was in 1950, I think, the year that they built Carvell Hall. I was working on that building.

J.L.: You were doing construction work?

O.P.: Uh-huh (Affirmative).

J.L.: What has been your experiences with employers?

O.P.: There are some employers that, old-time slave drivers, and then there are others who you can deal with, you know. But either way, most employers, I have found, that most of `em like loyalty.

J.L.: I'd like to ask you one question to tie things up. Had Local 453 remained in Crisfield with substantial membership and substantial funding, what effect would it have had on the labor market here in Crisfield, Maryland?

O.P.: It could only improve. I know the crab pickers have not had a raise since the union left.

(END OF TAPE.)