

Oral History Number: 098-027, 028
Interviewee: Chester Kinsey
Interviewers: Mary Murphy, Paul Melvin
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Chester Kinsey: They wouldn't have had to have done it, because I was getting asthma so bad that I had to quit from the fumes [laughs]

Paul Melvin: That was in Great Falls?

CK: What?

PM: Great Falls?

CK: Great Falls, yes.

Mary Murphy: Is your family from Montana?

CK: No, I came out in '33 [1933] to an uncle's place that's up north of Havre. That's where I got started in Montana.

MM: Was that a farm?

CK: Yes. Cattle. It was a lot of acres; it wasn't such a big one. He had a township land that he had leased or owned. Which seems like a lot, but he only had 130 cows and (unintelligible) yearlings.

PM: How big is a township? How many sections did it have?

CK: Thirty-six.

PM: Thirty-six sections. Oh boy. Pretty dry.

CK: It was poor grassland up there. They farmed, and then they quit. They gave up on it, and they were (unintelligible) back to grass. Now it's getting pretty fair. Great big place, but not a very big operation. Six hundred acres of farming and about 300 head of cattle on it—cows and yearlings, calves.

MM: Why did you come to Montana? Where did you come from?

CK: Michigan. The reason to come from Michigan was there wasn't any work there. I was out of high school a year and still hadn't found a job, so I came out here on a bicycle part of the way, a motorcycle part of the way, and a freight train the rest of the way. Went up to Havre and worked on that ranch a couple of years. Completely green to it.

MM: Did you like that work?

CK: Oh, yes. (unintelligible) even though we can't afford to own one.

Is this thing picking up my voice?

MM: (unintelligible)

CK: Ranched two years—

[Muffled noises; break in audio]

MM: That years was this?

CK: It'd be about '35(?).

MM: Did you have a union history in your family?

CK: Oh, yes. My father was a union man. He was in steel, iron later. Republic Steel. I didn't get much unionism from him, because he died when I was about 14. But he'd talked enough about it that I can remember vaguely two long strikes. One was 18 months, I believe, and the other was not so long. That was sometime between the time I was a very small child and 1920. He was an officer in the union, and he was union-minded. But by the time he was 45, he was a shot worker. He couldn't stand the mill any longer. He was a very strong man but was overtaxed, so he was out of it by 1921 or so. Then he went to Mt. Clemens, Michigan.

They went through some real good strikes in there, and one of the more prominent people in the left-wing labor movement showed up. And he was an enthusiast for Eugene Debs. But that's as much as I got out of him. I mean I just knew these strikes went on. Dad was home a lot or went down to Philadelphia and worked on my grandfather's farm. So that's the background.

MM: Had your mother worked outside the home?

CK: No, she didn't work out, and probably was not a very enthusiastic supporter of strikes, if I would know her very well. [laughs]

MM: It always puts a lot of hardship on the family.

CK: We didn't have the hardship. The poorer people did. For some reason or other, Dad was a better-off worker than most of the people who worked in the steel mills. There was a lot of those too. The Italians had the worst jobs—immigrants—Italians and others, Hungarians. He was on the heaviest mill, so he was in a higher-paid category to begin with. Then he had a farm background. He had bought houses with the help of his parents with loans, but they were two-percent loans, which there they always charged any of kids or the neighbors.

MM: Quite a switch from today. [laughs]

CK: He could draw off the farm. So, like I say, we never really suffered. We never went hungry or had great problems, which a lot of people did that were in that strike. That's the reason the strike was broken. They couldn't stand it any longer.

MM: Was that the 1919 steel strike?

CK: That would be about the time.

MM: Yes, that broke the steel union then.

CK: They still had a union, because Dad was still the secretary when he quit and left.

PM: They just couldn't get a contract?

CK: No. But they still had a union in the shop. Evidently, they did have enough power so that people kept paying their dues. They had enough that they had an organization then.

MM: When you got involved in the Farmers' Union then...I've always heard it's always hard to organize farmers and rural workers. Did you find that to be true?

CK: That was already organized in that area. In the '30s and the '20s, there was a lot of farm organization in Montana and North Dakota, so that you had Non-Partisan Leagues that were tremendous farm-based groups. The extreme left wing, of course, was centered around Plentywood with the Communist Parties and the Trotskyites all the shades that you can imagine—the Socialist Party center. So much of this has already had a good background, tending to be a radicalized farm group in Montana in the north part. And other parts, too, but they were stronger in the northeast corner. Hill County—which is around Havre—was a highly politicalized bunch of farmers, for some reason, the north stretch. The south stretch was—

PM: Was it the whole Hi-Line?

CK: The whole Hi-Line and scattered on in the triangle area—Choteau County and...The wheat farmers were the ones that were...Well, they were people that had more time. They'd go out and do a big field. They weren't like this type of farm, looking at your next job while you're

sitting on the tractor. He was able to do some thinking, and they were aware of the tremendous take the elevators were taking away from them, sometimes almost as much as they got for their wheat. Freight at the local margins was fantastic. So in the '20s, they started to organize.

By the time I went into it, they had an elevator at Havre. They had an oil company. The oil company was only three years old when I started with them. They just had a tin building. They started with very little capital, and now it's a tremendous organization. There's not as many farmers either, but still the farmers that are out there support their cooperative and it pays them to. So I attended a lot of Farmers Union meetings and got indoctrinated into their philosophy. They had an educational director named Mildred Stoltz, and she radicalized the Farmers Union considerably. She was really an organizer and carried on educational schools. These schools would last two weeks in the wintertime. Well, you can't get people to do that anymore.

MM: What kind of things would go on in these schools?

CK: We talked politics mostly, and economics, across the board. They had professors come in, and darn near a small college course in some areas of economics and whatnot.

MM: Did they assign readings in radical authors or was it mostly—

CK: All kinds. You had from the Communist clear through to the Non-Partisan Leaguer philosophy involved in those schools. Largely the Communists were a minority and the Communist philosophy, but they were there. They worked together on the general program, as far as I could see, and they still do. They always had some divisions inside the organization at times, but only in critical times, did it show. Like when the Korean War and the McCarthy days came, they began to try to shed the Communists, but they couldn't do it. Some of the leadership and the rank and file didn't disagree with us so much as they thought they wanted to disassociate us.

MM: Was this people who just subscribed to the communist philosophy, or was there an organized branch of the Communist Party?

CK: Some were organized, and some weren't. In the '30s, they had quite a few Finnish people that were in the area around Stanford, besides Geyser, Belt, who were Communists in fact as well as philosophy. Havre had none that I knew of in the Hill County area, but in Eastern Montana they had a real communist movement there. They had a *Producers News* that was edited by a communist. Then they had a sheriff for a while.

What's the paper over there? In Missoula?

MM: *The Borrowed Times*?

CK: *The Borrowed Times* had some articles on the Eastern Montana bunch, but they had some more extreme...if you'd call them extreme. They weren't so radical as they were...They had a philosophy, and they were working within the system, of course, because that's all you have to do when there's nothing else you can do.

Let's see, where else did they have them? Down around Red Lodge, among the farmers and workers down there, there were several that were Communists. And the Finnish.

MM: Yes, there are a lot of Socialist Finns in Butte. Did you find was a high proportion of them immigrants, people that maybe came with that philosophy, or were there organizing campaigns? How did it spread?

CK: They had organizers come out here, but I think many of them just came out. Some of them came with the philosophy from Europe, whether they were Finns or Swedes or Norwegians and Germans. Because those were the kind of people, as I remember, who were the communists and the socialists that I knew. Their kids followed along, because I knew the next generation and I met some of the older ones. I'll never forget, one time I was going down into the south part of the state to do some organizing for the Progressive Party. I stopped to see, or there was meeting at Loren whatever-his-name-was at Belt. He gave me a whole list of names, "These are good people that'll help you." I went down, and they were all dead. [laughs]

MM: I've run across that in trying to find people. [laughs]

CK: That sort of tickled me. That guy had a lot of good contacts. [laughs]

MM: How did you come to be an organizer? You just had joined the union.

CK: In Havre, I was an activist in the Farmers Union, This teamsters was a real good organization at the time. It hadn't fallen into its Dave Beck (?) days yet. They came in there and organized the Teamsters, and they were also part of the rest of the labor movement. They suggested a Farm-Labor Council. The farmers there were politicalized anyhow and were susceptible to the idea, and so it was their effort that did it. One of the organizers was the first secretary of it. They met monthly—representatives of labor and representatives for farmers. Always they selected farmers, because the laborers couldn't afford to go to the legislature. So from then on through the '50s, they've never had anything but a good, voting representative or senator from the county. I was the second secretary, and we published a little paper—a couple of us—a little sheet mimeographed and we got in a little hot water occasionally.

MM: What would you get in hot water about?

CK: One of the things, the unions were trying to get the John Deere hooked up with us. It was union, and they were trading with the coop. I was the secretary and signed it and gosh, they

came down there and they was going to quit and everything else, but they didn't. They just stormed a little. I got a little flak but not much. The man who managed it, Gilbert Peterson (?), I didn't realize he was as progressive as he was, but back in the early '20s he was a wild-eyed radical among the farmers of the area, that is, to the extent that he was secretary of the Farm-Labor Councils...I mean, Farm-Labor Party efforts that went on in those years with the Non-Partisan League, I should say. In the Non-Partisan League days he was active, so, while he wasn't very happy with it, he was of a turn of mind to look at the guy and to work with him. You'd think he was a conservative, but he wasn't. His kids all grew up to be active in the Farmers Union.

MM: In the Farmers Union, now, they would organize farmers who owned their own farms, and would they also organize laborers who worked on those farms?

CK: No, they weren't concerned with the laborers. In fact, it isn't practical anyhow in this type of labor that was consistent in Montana. It had to be organized some different way, and the IWN did, sometimes or another, have some of them organized, but they were too a migrant group. They came and went as they damn pleased. They'd stay as long as they wanted to, and go, and accepted the wages that were offered if they needed them in the job. If they didn't, they didn't take them. They were an independent-minded bunch of farm laborers in those days. Even in the '30s when things were tough. Weren't getting paid very much, but they'd still quit the job at the drop of a hat.

In Montana, this seemed to be...it didn't seem to stretch east. We must have got the ones that drifted. Because east, why, they'd work people for almost nothing, I mean, North Dakota. Of course, the farmers weren't getting it either. The first year I was on the farm, we shipped two carloads of cattle and got 600 dollars for the two carloads. He had two full-time hired men, myself and another, at 30 dollars a month. His wheat was two bits a bushel, no crop anyhow, so he was losing money, but of course he was able to. Some couldn't, and they went down the drain. He kept expanding on those bad years too. You could pick up land (unintelligible). Title would come up and stuff like that that some of the others couldn't do.

By that time in the '30s, the ones that were left had a base. So many had taken off in the '20s that the eastern area was homesteaded much too small for the kind of farming, especially when they weren't getting very good crops so much of the time. Big machinery made that country. The horse farmer was too slow. Can't get over it quick. When it's time, you're sunk on the dryland.

MM: So by the '30s, then, the Wobblies had pretty much died out, so there was not much organization around.

CK: I never ran into any that I recognized. I know people who have been Wobblies, in later years, but at the time I never ran into any that I knew was one.

MM: In the Farm-Labor Councils and Parties, did the farmers and laborers get along pretty well then? There wasn't a conflict of interest?

CK: We always had conflicts, but we got along. There was bound to be—the nature of two different operations—but there was a real realization among farmers in those days that they had to have the allies of the laborers. There's still a certain amount that do now. They're getting less all the time, it seems. The farmers are getting bigger and have more of a business approach to things than a working approach. There's a lot of them that have the working approach that still don't savvy. They think that labor gets too much money and then they have to buy, but they sure like to sell to those people when they have something. It's their best customer when they realize it.

Yes, the farmer has been a sad case, in my opinion. He has all the tools to keep his prices up, and not enough of them to use them. The internal association in this state and whatnot is a tremendous organization. It has a lot of outlets or inlets or whatever you want to call them. They're branching out and getting into the production ends of it and moving closer to the consumer market constantly. They're associated with other cooperatives that export grain, and they've got two export warehouses. One that blew up in Galveston or someplace, and another one in Louisiana. They're trying to get one out here in Portland, but that hasn't come off the ground yet. But we have this in other areas.

They have the Farm Bureaus that cooperate with us. Well, they never did in this state until very recently. Little cooperation during the legislature, with all farm organizations. But the Farm Bureau. Then the Kansas Farmers Union has a big system of cooperatives, and Missouri has a system of cooperatives that is separate. They're now working together, have been for the last five or six years or a little longer than that. During these years, they have gotten to the point where they can export some grain now. But previous to this time, anything to export had to go through the Big Five or Six or Seven, whatever it is, of international grain-buyers that's had a monopoly on capitalist grain. So when Carter gets excited and shuts off the grain, why, they buy from the same companies from someplace else. The only one that suffers is the United States farmers. A very ridiculous situation.

We're off the earlier thing a little.

MM: That's okay. Yes, we're back to the question of how you became an organizer.

CK: First, I became an oil company manager, and so I stopped, was through with the Teamsters Union, because I was working in the eastern part of the state. The next place I was in Warden (?). Then World War Two came along. When we came out of the war, I wasn't really interested in going back to coop management. I always spent a lot of time at meetings and whatnot during those years. After the war, when I came out of the Army, I had the job with the Farmers Union. Don Chapman was the president then, and I was a field representative for them.

Also I got elected to the Farm-Labor Council, the state organization—I don't remember the exact name it had at the time—in time to help defeat Wheeler [Burton K. Wheeler], who was secretary at the time. There was a lot of people thought Wheeler ought to be cleaned out, and nobody wanted to take a whack at it, so it wound up with me. There was a hell of a lot more able people than I was there, but all of them had families or some special problems that they didn't want to take it, so I wound up taking it. Wheeler gave us the credit for defeating him, and it was Wheeler's friends—the easiest organizing I ever did. Every place you went, there was his friends who had helped get him started, and he was a crooked old bastard all the way down the line. Finally we had a list of names in about every town around the state—one or two or three or four—and I'd go to those towns, and if I couldn't find one on the first names, they'd tell me somebody that would. Always had somebody to distribute literature and do the local work that got started, whatever it was.

MM: Did you go all over the state for that?

CK: Yes. And I was on the Mine-Mill [International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers] payroll.

MM: You were! [laughs]

CK: Bill Mason (?) was the district board member then. So I worked for them when I left. That was part of the financing me so that I could do it. They paid my salary, and we got money from unions from all over the country.

PM: Just to defeat Wheeler?

CK: Yes.

PM: He'd become that bad in Congress?

CK: Well, he had two things wrong with him in Congress. One, he'd deserted the liberal cause, and he was double-crossing and everything. The only ones that he did really good for were the railroad workers. The second thing is, he had Nazi connections. His law firm was still doing work for the Nazis after the war—after he was defeated. Theoretically, he tipped the submarines off to the fact that the convoys were leaving right from the Senate floor.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

CK: —Wheeler-Ford combination. They had the Republican Ford, sort of got tied in with Wheeler some way or another, and I didn't understand all that. All I knew was, I was out to defeat Wheeler.

MM: What year was it that he was finally defeated?

CK: It had to be '46, The Farmers Union had representatives at the Trades and Labor Assembly in Great Falls during those years, which is indicative of the fact that there was considerable farm-labor cooperation. In '36 we formed the *People's Voice*, and that was a mixed group who did that. Mostly farmers who financed it. Farmers have more loose money than working people do, even when they're broke. That just puts him more on a deficit. Frequently, we can do something that our wage-earning friends don't have the loose money to do.

MM: You're going to have also more time to think about things than maybe people—

CK: Well, they did in the eastern part. If you're a (unintelligible) a farmer, you don't. If you've got a small operation, you've got to keep your nose to the grindstone. However, they had a pretty good organization in Yellowstone Valley, east of Billings, There's a difference in the farmers entirely. The prairie farmer's been around more, too. He has more idle time. He had cattle to take through to St. Paul. You go down there on the trains. So they weren't, what you call, provincial type of people. They had been around.

MM: So you think that the eastern part of the state was much more radical than the western part?

CK: The most radical was in the Plentywood area.

MM: In the '30s, did people keep secret the fact that they were maybe a member of the Communist Party?

CK: Some did, and some didn't.

MM: Was there any kind of persecution, or would people get in trouble?

CK: I didn't run into it if there were. I wasn't a Communist then. I had a great respect for them, because they were the ones who were organizing the old folks, were helping with everything that went along. I mean they were the mainspring that got things started. They weren't the ones that did the work always, but they were the ones that were the catalytic agent that got things going. They decided something, then something happened in many different places all at the same time, which is the only thing that was different about them than some of the others,

because the others didn't have any kind of a...sit down and decide on something and then have it happen. They tried to implement it in various places.

MM: So they had a good organization?

CK: Well, it was basically good. It had its problems, too—splits and divisions. Near as I can read, nothing I experienced that. They formed the Workers Alliance [Workers Alliance of America] and helped them organize. They were officers in it, among other people. I mean they didn't dominate them necessarily, but there was always somebody in all these organizations.

PM: Where was that headquartered out of—the Workers Alliance?

CK: Unemployed people on welfare. It was a welfare organization, is what it was.

MM: Was that all over the state? Was that what the unemployed councils...were they part of that?

CK: I presume they were. I wasn't involved in them. I just knew about them because they'd come to us for help occasionally. They wanted us to endorse their meetings and things like that. Occasionally, we contributed a little to it as individuals or the organization for defenses. They had one defense fight in Great Falls.

MM: Oh, really. What was that about?

CK: The press called it a raid, and the Workers Alliance called it a distribution. They weren't getting clothes out and winter was coming, and they tried all the legal methods and nothing happened. Went to Helena and consulted with Lee Metcalf, who was working in the Attorney General's office. Or they consulted probably with whoever was in there. I don't remember who it was, but Lee was in the office and he was the one who had helped them all he could. So they did that. They had gone to the county commissioners and still no distribution.

So some of them had worked in the welfare office, and they just went in and told the guy to sit down and issued it out on cards what they considered about 49 dollars worth. So it was petty larceny. [laughs] When it was all through, why, they told the guy to get up. The sheriff had to know it, the police had to know it, and wouldn't show up, or didn't. Then Bill Davie (?), who was president, went to Helena with Jack Richardson (?) on some more Workers Alliance affairs, and coming back they were met out to (unintelligible). Met one of the Workers Alliance people, who told them not to go into the town because they had everybody in jail except them. So they went in the back roads and didn't go home. They'd put 10,000 dollars against the five or seven...I think it was seven. The next day, why, Bill and Jack went out and raised the 10,000 dollars in about three hours' time, which they thought was impossible for them to do. [laughs] There was a long trial. That was the first I ever knew anything on that. I knew Bill Davie after the

war. We just won the war. I had contributed some money for his defense—of their defense. So that was the kind of things that the Communists were involved in, and they did very well.

MM: Were they still strong after World War Two?

CK: No, but they were there. I was involved in it all through the McCarthy era, clear down to, say, recent times. They had some divisions, and it got pretty weak and sloughed off a lot during the McCarthy period just out of fear. I had run into it a couple of times, and I knew that that had to be the reason for my losing...not getting one or losing a job twice that I know of. One, if I'd have been smart enough, I could have had the letter and sent it to Lee Metcalf, because what they were doing was completely illegal. Just FBI putting the pressure on the employer.

MM: What was it like here in Montana during the McCarthy period?

CK: Well, I don't know. We were fussing with getting out of the Korean War and get away with it. We had no bad things happen like they had some places—no big deals. A lot of people were scared because the FBI was coming around to see them and things like that. For some reason or another they never came to see me, but they did to a lot of my friends. Some of them got the (unintelligible), and some didn't,

MM: Was there a lot of Communist members in the unions...like in the Mine and Mill?

CK: There were a number of them, yes. They had quite a few Communists. I wouldn't say there was a great number of them. When I worked for Mine-Mill, which was the second time, during the strike at the lead smelter at Herculaneum, on that staff there was at least half a dozen Communists, I would say.

[Doorbell rings]

MM: Members of the Communist Party, or just—

CK: As near as I...How would I know? Those were McCarthy years, and I wouldn't know for sure who was and who wasn't. They were all following the same kind of a line, which was one that was a practical line as far as trying to hold the Mine-Mill together. Philosophy wasn't so much involved as just survival.

[to another person] Hello, how are you?

There were quite a few Communists in it, but I'm sure there weren't as many as the right wing would lead everybody to believe. But they were organized, and they could make things happen. The others were all just running one way and another. They had a line, and that was the main reason they made themselves felt. Of course, they were real active in the '30s and all organizing. Probably wouldn't have been a whole lot of organizing without them. They were the

ones who had the guts and the sense of purpose that was necessary and willing to sacrifice. John L. Lewis, who was very anti-Communist at some times in his life before and after the '30s, hired a lot of them during the '30s to start the CIO.

PM: Yes, I read about that.

CK: Yes. It's amazing.

MM: And then purged them all when it got—

CK: Yes. [laughs] When it was established. Well, that's the thing that we noticed in the Farmers Union, was that they began to put a little pressure to eliminate the Communists that were prominent or had influential position if they could. It didn't work some places, and it did some.

MM: Who would bring the pressure to bear? Other officers?

CK: Don Chapman would go and talk to people. He was the guy who hired me. I told him that I was a member of the Party. I had just joined it. He wanted Communists around until the McCarthy days got real tough. He was one of the last to sort of buckle under. When the one in Iowa (unintelligible), he set up another organization. He made them set up another organization. So (unintelligible) original Farmers Union. It wasn't a politically correct thing to do, because it wasn't practical. But, like I say, the Farmers Union here finally sort of buckled in. For a long time, they didn't. The national organization figured we was going to have fascism, we was going to ride it out.

MM: Were there still educational programs going on then?

CK: In the '40s, there was a good deal of stuff until about '40...until about '50. Then the farmers became very single-minded. Not all of them, but so many of them. They ceased to be interested in the organization. Like the cooperatives, they'd support all that, but they were just out to make a dollar. Those that didn't were wonderful help in anything you needed finances for. People who before the war were just barely getting along. A few things happened. One was, the triangle area—this is where I was familiar with—began to get a little more rainfall and the big machinery. These people who had 5,000 or 6,000 acres of farm and were just barely making a living suddenly found themselves wealthy. One time when the 11 Communists were on trial, the Communists came to town and looked me up, and I was secretary of the Progressive Party. I went out north of Great Falls in an afternoon and raised 2,000 dollars, which—

PM: In those days probably was—

CK: You've never seen money roll in like that.

PM: Where was the trial for the 11 men? Was that a national trial?

CK: Yes, in New York, Many of them went to jail. But these people weren't Communists by any means. They just didn't think that was the thing to do. Then I went out raising money for the Mine-Mill strike one time among farmers north of Great Falls. This was in later years, after I'd come back and started work as a laborer because I was too hot for the Farmers Union anymore. I didn't really belong in Mine-Mill. I was just put in there to fill a gap during that raid in Missouri. So I was working as a laborer, and the Mine-Mill people wanted to know if I'd go out and raise some help for propaganda purposes as well as the help they needed.

MM: What year was this?

CK: It had to be about '50, '51. It was during the strike at Coeur d'Alene. So I'd get a local farmer and we'd go out in a pickup truck, and we'd ask them for a donation of wheat or cash. More than half of them would give wheat, and they gave a lot, too—10, 12, or 15 bushels, 20 bushels. Just start shoveling out of their bin and into the truck—

[Pounding noises; Break in audio]

MM: Then you were working for Mine-Mill when they were expelled from the CIO?

CK: No. But during that strike, I went out and raised money and grain, and we took a semi-load of flour over. While the Farmers Union wasn't anxious to have their name put into it, they furnished the truck and supplied the GTA (?)—supplied the truck and the cost of it. No cost to the strike committee. But they didn't want their names smeared around.

PM: So that was all (unintelligible) that change in attitude back then.

CK: Well, gradual. People got scared. The change in attitude was really one of making money. The guys that came out of the Army and went into farming. I think it was also affecting the workers. They said, "The hell with it, I'm going to get mine." We saw a gradual deterioration as the wheel horses began to die off or drift off. They didn't disappear—don't get me wrong—but it weakened it greatly. The activists were much less, and we weren't developing new ones. You'd look around the state and see a lot of legislators, and they were Farmers Union people who had gone through Stoltz's school. Millie Stoltz made a real impact on this state.

MM: I had never heard of her.

PM: Had she ever written any books?

CK: She wrote one book [*This Is Yours*]. I don't remember the name of it, but the Farmers Union would be glad to loan it to you. They have it in their library. Like I say, she had more impact than most people will really realize.

MM: Was it the courses that you took with her that kind of set you on the path that you took?

CK: Well, it helped me. It didn't set me on necessarily. I got a socialist philosophy way back in about '28 or '29, that area, before the Depression came in. I don't know why, but it was in high school, I guess. That was where. It must have been in '30 or '31. Because I had a teacher that suggested a whole bunch of subjects to write a theme on. I had heard about socialism from my dad a little bit—Eugene Debs—so I picked that one. I could have picked communism, I suppose. It was probably on the list. Then we had one guy talk on it from (unintelligible) kind of liberal school in Michigan. So I was convinced of the philosophy that the people should own the means of production and private enterprise.

When I came to Montana, I didn't even know that the Soviet Union was a communist nation. I was that ignorant. It wasn't until the last part of the...well, it had to be about '38 or '39 that I started getting the *Daily Worker*. Some guy sold it to me. There was another paper called the *American Guardian* by a pacifist from Oklahoma City. He was pro-socialist and friendly with the Soviet Union, which socialists in general weren't. So he did a good job in bringing me up to date on what really was happening in the world. Then the *Daily Worker* was a real education all the way along. I was the only one in Opheim that ever got a *Daily Worker*, I'm sure, when I was up there.

MM: Was it easy to get leftist literature out here?

CK: What's that?

MM: Was it easy to get leftist literature out here?

CK: Oh yes, it was available. Yes, at the Farmers Union meetings, there was always some of it around. Somebody was peddling it. It was pretty available.

MM: Well when...I can't remember what I was going to ask.

How long did you continue to work for Mine-Mill?

CK: I wasn't helping very long. I worked for them during that election campaign, and then for about a four-month period in the raid on the lead works at Herculaneum. That's all I ever worked for Mine-Mill.

PM: Where was that?

CK: Herculaneum, Missouri.

PM: Who was raiding? The steel (unintelligible)?

CK: Glass workers. But they were under attack so many places. That was the year Travis [Maurice Eugene Travis] was beat up so bad, lost an eye.

PM: In Alabama.

CK: Yes.

MM: When you said that you got too hot for the Farmers Union, did they fire you outright?

CK: No, I just felt that I was too hot for them, and they were awful happy that I didn't want to come back. I was a little fed up with what was going on in the Farmers Union, not that I was deserting it or anything of the kind, but Don was taking a cautious position on organizing. If I was going to be out there I didn't want to be just talking at meetings, I wanted to try to get organization going in areas where it wasn't. Then the Progressive Party came along, and I became secretary of it for the duration of that, and the Progressive Party for a year or so afterwards. During that time, I became hot. A lot of farmers would have been shaken to have me come into their meetings. When that Progressive Party got shot in '48, I had already told Don I wasn't coming back. He was insisting I do come back until afterwards, and then he was sort of happy that I wasn't coming back. That wouldn't have been good, because there was too much division then and too much Red-baiting where I was concerned. They had replaced me with somebody that was more radical than I was. That guy was doing his job inside the Farmers Union and had worked for the Farmers Union until finally the McCarthy thing got him out of it.

MM: What did you do after that?

CK: I worked up at Hungry Horse. It got so I couldn't work at Great Falls anymore because of the smog there. You think it's a windy city, but it isn't. I couldn't sleep in town. I'd go out in the country about three nights a week, and it was getting towards winter, so I quit and went up to Flathead. Then the next spring I went to work at the Hungry Horse Dam.

MM: Did you still remain politically active in all of this?

CK: Oh yes, at a much slower level, lower key. I was in the Farmers Union there and active, and there was a party and we had an organization up there (unintelligible) shaken down. Then I sort of got so I was just a member and nothing else for a number of years. Always doing something but nothing radical as any (unintelligible). We modified policy in the Farmers Union, but we couldn't do much with it. So that it wasn't quite as reactionary as we would have been without us. That's where I had my base, actually not in the labor movement.

MM: Did you have a lot of contacts with party members in other states, or was it run on a real local kind of level?

CK: Oh, we had a few people come through a couple times. Lem Harris, you've probably read someplace or another. He's one that came out here, I got to know him, but I don't know if he'd remember me anymore if I'd write him a letter one day. He must be getting pretty old.

MM: This is kind of...I come up from the South and last year was reading a lot about the Southern Tenant Farm Workers Union. Did any of the other farmers unions ever kind of reach out to them?

CK: No. They didn't branch out that way. They were pretty self-centered, and they had a farm-type of an operation.

MM: I met a black man named Hosea Hudson who was a member of the Communist Party and helped organize the tenant farm workers down there, and he was just so inspirational when he would get up and talk. He was 90 years old, practically, and just ready to keep on struggling.

CK: Well, good for him. What's his name?

MM: Hosea Hudson. I'll get a copy of his book [*Black Worker in the Deep South: A Personal Record*] and send it to you. He wrote his own little autobiography, sitting in a park, his experiences. It's really wonderful.

CK: I knew some wonderful people who worked down in there. It was the hardest place in the world to work. Dangerous. Guerrilla warfare.

MM: It sounds like here it was pretty hard, too, at times.

CK: I'll tell you a little episode when I was at a convention in Denver. Aubrey Williams (?), who Don Chapman, without a doubt, was—even if I was fighting with him in the last years—the best president we've ever had. We haven't topped him since. I mean he had stature with a hell of a lot of people, and you wouldn't hardly believe it to look at him. He'd been a state senator. But I was in the Denver convention—

MM: Just a minute while I put on a—

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

CK: I met a fellow from Alabama named Tom Ludwig (?), if I remember correctly. He was manager of their big coop setting down the valley from Selma south—whole bunch of coops. They were just starting, and they didn't know which end was up. Tom wanted to know how they should set up this thing because I was Don Chapman's man. Williams said, "Well, he'll have the answers." I told them, well, there were several ways they could go about it. They wanted to know how to get their educational funds out of this thing. They were making money. I said, "Well, a lot of them use five percent of the net earnings. Then some have been talking about using, but haven't tried if yet, half a percent of their gross, so you have an educational fund all the time." Because felt it was very necessary. But nobody had tried that yet.

He went back, and so I came down there in the '50s, when I was working for Mine-Mill. After I got through, I went down to see my mother and dad. They were living in Florida at the time, and stopped to see them. They had got straightened out, and he'd put five percent on the gross. (unintelligible) that's about what they made. But they got themselves straightened out. Somebody else explained to them. I said, "Well, God, that certainly will use five percent." They were still functioning good, and they had what they called open meetings—black and white were not segregated necessarily. But he said the whites would go one side, and the blacks the other. He says there wasn't any policy for it.

He took me out one day to see the various...his own business of going around and seeing people—members. He was a real good operator. He said the right things all the time. He took me to black and whites. One white man was the brother to the president of the Farmers Union in Alabama, but his other brother was head of Pepsi-Cola. This guy was barefoot and ragged, house without paint. [laughs] There was sure a striking difference in that family. [laughs] Then he took me to several black people's too. One was an old fellow. He had a strawberry farm and an unpainted house. When we got away, he said, "Now this man we just went to could buy all the rest of the people behind us out, but he doesn't dare paint his house." He says, "If he does, they'll burn him out." That's the way it was. Black people didn't dare paint their place (unintelligible). Could own a good car and get away with it, but they couldn't spruce up their places and make them look prosperous.

He said that things had improved. This was back in about '50, I suppose. He said, "You know, I used to go into a store, and if there was a line and a white man came in, he got in ahead of me no matter what. Now, if a man's in a hurry, he'll ask to get in ahead—that's one thing—but otherwise, they go to the back of the line." So that much was an improvement then. They had a lot of improving to do after that yet, because he was still in the same situation where he didn't dare paint his house—spruce up his place.

MM: There weren't very many blacks here in Montana, were there?

CK: No, there aren't even yet.

MM: Were there problems...I don't really much about this at all. But the Indians? Were there independent Indian farmers who tried to join the union?

CK: There are not very many in the Farmers Union, but there are some. One of them is Mac (?) and his wife Celia (?). They're living in town, and she was always prominent in the Farmers Union. Mac was always a good Farmers Union man and had progressive attitudes and so did she. She's in her 70s now, and she came to the school after in the war. Had two little daughters.

MM: Do the Farmers Unions still run educational programs?

CK: Yes, they have some camps every summer. Some 30 or 40 people come. But it isn't as good. They just haven't got the...People have so damn many things to do now. They're so organization tied-in with 4-H and many other things. Yet we have Mickey Johnson (?), who came through the Farmers Union program. He's a legislator in Stillwater County area. Well, I could think of some more. Jarveson (?). You know of his voting record, I presume, by now.

MM: Yes, because it seems as though a lot of the labor unions didn't emphasize educational programs very much.

CK: No, they didn't. But for years we had Farm-Labor Institutes. Lucile [Lucile Speer]—what was her last name—in Missoula was the mainspring behind organizing the mechanics of it. Every year we had a two-day session, for years and years, and they now are talking about doing it again. But they're to have a meeting the 17th. I've been bugging them for years. When we had a big squabble and Clyde Jarvis pulled a boner, quit and ran for Congress when he should have known better, why, things deteriorated in the Farmers Union because the internal squabble was so violent. Maybe it's healed over enough now. I don't know.

PM: Was the squabble just over who succeeded Clyde?

CK: It was over Clyde. Not who succeeded him, but it made some divisions in the Farmers Union. Now Terry [Murphy] is a conservative, but will have the right attitude towards farm-labor cooperation. He fits the farmer's average attitude better than most people would, I guess—better than a lot would. Terry Murphy is the president now. We'll see how he does. He's trying to build things. Clyde made some terrible mistakes. He didn't keep the alliance together inside the organization, and he did a wonderful job outside.

The best president we've had except Don Chapman and close to as good as he was. Maybe as good. If he'd been a little closer to his membership, why, he would have been as good. Maybe better. That was his weak point, so he had people so mad at him for various things, and some of them justified. This was one of the things that was so bad about the situation the last few years, and then Jim Stevens (?) went in as...Never could get anything out of him in the way of farm-

labor cooperation. He wasn't against it, wasn't for it. He just...I don't know what the hell he did while he was in there.

MM: Do you think that the Farmers Union was run pretty democratically?

CK: Oh, yes. Some of the cooperatives pretty democratic, too. They aren't perfect. I'm not trying to kid you any. They have their internal fights, but they also have their internal direction. A percentage of the people make a difference, just like they do in politics. It isn't all of them, by any means, but a lot of people who keep the policies fairly decent as a whole. There are a lot that try to run down the farmers' cooperatives as being big business-oriented, but if they aren't big, they aren't worth a damn. These small local coops by themselves, they hardly scratch the surface on the problem. The potential of the cooperative to protect the farmer is great if they'd use it. But he hasn't used it. It'll probably go down before he does.

MM: You sound like you've pretty much kept your way of thinking over all these years.

CK: Yes, haven't changed much. Hardly at all.

MM: A lot of leftists seem to have gotten so disillusioned or downbeaten by everything.

CK: You get that way during the last few years. I mean the conditions haven't been good for progressive development until McCarthy's day—later McCarthy—that was the first you began to see anybody...the young people barging in and trying to do something. It was a sad situation before. Everything seems to be getting worse, and of course, it is during the last stages of capitalism. Everything they do is wrong, even though they're trying to do what they think is right. A leftist could figure it out better than they do, as far as a policy that would make them survive. [laughs]

PM: [laughs] Yes, I think so. We were just talking about that today. We couldn't find out why when they've got everything anyway, they're rubbing our nose in it, almost.

MM: It they only hired us as their advisors.

PM: You helped set up the *People's Voice* back in the '30s?

CK: I helped sell stock for the original one in Hill County.

PM: Who all was involved in setting that up? Was that strictly Farmers Union?

CK: Farmers Union people and laboring people. It wasn't any organization.

PM: You was just individuals. It wasn't any organization.

CK: Yes, but prominent people in the organizations all belonged to it. Presidents of the Farmers Union and most of the...or a great number of the labor top leadership were involved in it. For years, they had a Communist sitting on the board of directors. So the Communists had a little weight in the world. Cap Bruce (?) was the first editor. A fine old fellow. He screamed an awful lot, but you can't say that he did anything real wrong. And then Harry Billings (?). You've probably run into him by now. You should talk to him, maybe.

PM: They're up in Thompson Falls?

CK: Yes. He's got more in his head, and he's got a good head, too. It remembers things. He'll talk your arm and leg off, and that's all right. That's what you need. His wife is no slouch either. She knows what's going on in the world and then some. She don't agree very much with me. We get along, but I mean this communist thing, why, she's a very strong anti-communist biased—very liberal or progressive. You can call her a liberal. She's more than that.

MM: Were there many women involved with the Communists?

CK: Yes, quite a few. Let's see, damn near half of them.

PM: What finally brought down the *People's Voice*? Was it the Vietnam War? That's what I'm wondering.

CK: Harry got tired, for one thing, and the Lee newspapers were doing a better job of covering. So that the *People's Voice* was not the only one that was handing out information that was important.

PM: The papers did get better after Anaconda sold them and Lee took over?

CK: Yes. That was part of it. But maybe he got tired, and nobody else was left that was capable. He was capable. He had everything he put in there documented or quoted from somebody else. So nobody ever was able to take a whack at him. Never did he get on the anti-communist binge during the McCarthy days when he was running the paper. He stayed on issues. He did a fine job, I think, as good as anybody's ever done.

MM: That paper had a pretty wide circulation, didn't it?

CK: Not big. Five thousand, maybe, and it was well respected, especially among the legislators.

PM: Oh, I remember Dad waiting for his *People's Voice*. When something hot was going on, I never understood what they were, but I remember the *People's Voice* and him reading them.

CK: [laughs] It had a lot of influence. It made a lot of people upset. [laughs]

MM: I can't think of any other questions, can you, right off hand?

PM: We'll try to interview Jack Richardson, too. I know Jack. I've known him for a couple years. I had no idea. I have known him as an artist, and I've known Jim.

CK: It was Jack's brother that went to Great Falls. I may have said the wrong name. But Jack was on the council.

PM: Yes, we've heard about Jack from other people. A couple weeks ago was the first I knew.

CK: Where did you hear from anybody else that knew about Jack?

PM: Mary heard...It's a real nebulous network now.

MM: I've been just collecting all kinds of names of people.

CK: Yes, but where did you get...Because almost nobody knows it except me—

MM: I didn't hear his name—

CK: —and people who I've talked to, and I just wondered.

MM: There's a man in Butte who's also doing labor history, and he said, "There's a man called Jack Anderson who used to be involved with the labor movement out of Great Falls, and he lives over by Helena and you should try to call him."

I said, "Okay," He gave me the name of a woman here in town who supposedly knew him, named Penny Lucas (?). So I called Penny, and she said, "No, I don't really know him, but I spent an evening talking with him and he was really interesting. But there are these people up in Great Falls that know him."

I can't offhand remember. The woman was Dutch, and I'm not sure what her husband was and they work for a child care center. I called and asked them, and she said, "Oh, it's not Jack Anderson. It's Jack Richardson," and told me where he lived. I called him, and he said sure I could come out and talk with him, but he was snowbound for a while, so we decided to wait until the spring. But it was real kind of strange—

CK: Might get Paul Richards (?) to interview him, because he's already interviewed Lucy Davie (?) is (unintelligible) Davie's wife. She was involved in a trial and Workers Alliance affairs. Carried pickets whenever anybody had to. A real help.

MM: Is she still alive?

CK: Yes.

MM: Where does she live in Helena?

CK: In Great Falls.

MM: That seems to have been a real active—

CK: We were real good in Great Falls up until recently. In the last 20 years now, things have not been good there. I don't know exactly all the reasons, partly, the base, I suppose, and partly...Whatever it is, I don't know. Not being part of it. But when we were in Great Falls—and I worked out of Great Falls for four years or more—we had all kinds of things going. You've probably heard of the Missouri Valley Authority.

MM: Yes.

CK: Well, that originated in Great Falls, in spite of what anybody else'll tell you. Nobody really admits it, but it originated there and it was during the war. The war was close to its close. They had a discussion group there which was made up of Farmers Union and labor people and independent liberals, and it was about an even 20 people that met and talked about various economic problems and issues of the day and whatnot. Bill Davie was one of them. He was the Communist, and then Ken Field (?), who worked for the Farmers Union by that time—paper editor before he was president. Steinmetz (?) was chairman (unintelligible) was one involved in it. They had a lot of liberal people and progressives and radicals, all mixed in, and they discussed the issues. They were anticipating a depression after the war. They thought this, so they sent Steinmetz up to see Murray—Senator Murray—when he was speaking at Browning or Shelby—one of those places. So he got the UE to do some research on it, and it grew up into a pretty big organization here in the state of Montana and all the Missouri Valley states. But it didn't quite make it. The dams got built—some of them—but they had a comprehensive plan that was pretty complete. Damn near made the river run steady the year round.

MM: It must have been really encouraging to be able to do work where you could actually get things done. It seems that people on the left now are really frustrated.

CK: Well, they shouldn't be so frustrated. Of course, right through here, today, things are not good. We don't have enough enthusiastic people around. The last few years have been improving, and it's going to get so they that have more to fight about. I don't know whether there are going to be enough people to do it or not. I'm sure that things are not getting much worse economically, because what they're doing is almost all wrong. They're raising interest rates, which putting people unemployed. They're going to balance the budget hell or high water. Well, they aren't going to balance it, because the income tax is going to come down.

MM: Do you think it's easier to organize in hard times?

CK: As a rule, yes. Where you have some issues to organize, because you've got to recognize that there hasn't been a change in world attitudes at all during these years. It's been person-oriented and policy-oriented. The Vietnam War was such a terrible thing, and it was easy to organize around that. But that wasn't to change the world. That was only to change the policies and to get us out of Vietnam. The same was true in the Korean War. They did a lot of work on that. That was in (unintelligible). People would still sign our petitions (unintelligible). A lot of petitions. Apparently we had some weight, somebody did anyhow, because Eisenhower saw fit to get us out.

PM: Do you know any people in Great Falls who were associated with Mine-Mill?

CK: Yes.

PM: That are still around?

CK: Ray Graham (?) would be able to tell you a hell of a lot. He's been with them. He worked in the plant, he's been officer in the local, and is full of information and is articulate and probably has a sharper memory than I have on details. I get so many details, I don't know what to do with them all. That's what you've got to go through, I guess,

MM: I think it's just important to preserve this stuff, and to also help us understand that there was this whole tradition of opposition to what we think is so horrible now.

CK: All this activity has just slowed down. It hasn't gone out of the window entirely. But it's wiped out the Communist Party because there just isn't anybody around that's in it anymore. They're old, who are. I'm 67, and the rest of them are older except one, and I don't think he's involved anymore. I'm not sure. I'm only involved when I pay some money into them.

MM: You don't have meetings at all or do anything?

CK: We haven't had in several years now. There's four or five of us, and we're all doing something but it's on a local level. It is hard to stay in the party line. In fact, the logical thing is generally what the party line is anyhow. Get the papers. I get the *People's World*. I guess there's still some around, but not very many. A number of people who think that way but don't do anything about it. All of us are involved in bourgeois politics.

MM: It sounds like you had had this philosophy for a long time before you joined the Party. What made you decide to finally join the organization?

CK: I probably would have joined it sooner if I hadn't gone to war. I had already reached the opinion that I should belong. During the war, why, there were two or three Communists in an outfit and we got together, even though I wasn't a member. But there were some of them who

were pretty effective Communists. Of course, we're just like any other organization. We've got some that are effective and some aren't. But we had enough. Say we had 50 people in Montana who were Communists and young and energetic. They could have an impact. Having a single mindedness in some particular issues wouldn't have been necessary. (unintelligible).

PM: Is there anybody in Helena here that was in Mine-Mill that you know of?

CK: Some are in it now, but I don't know any of the old-timers.

PM: They've still got a few bunch of young Turks out there.

CK: What?

PM: They've got a few young Turks out there now who are starting to organize and realize they're getting a pretty raw deal.

CK: I don't even know who the officers out there are, and they aren't taking part in political things and they should be. I thought I was trying to build myself up into doing something about it, but generally speaking, I'm the agitator. I don't do much work. [laughs]

MM: You need one of those to get things going. [laughs]

CK: I'm trying to get somebody to do things, help the labor movement, finally get something done here and then have a meeting. (unintelligible)

[End of interview]