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John Fancher Memoir

F213. Fancher, John (1899-1984)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 76 mins., 41 pp.

COAL MINING AND UNION ACTIVITIES PROJECT

Fancher, Springfield resident, recalls the 1930's coal mine wars in Central Illinois. He discusses his disagreement with the actions of John L. Lewis, being barred from the United Mine Workers Union, formation of the Progressive Miners of America, violence between the two unions, the automobile caravan to Mulkeytown, and violence involving non-union miners. He also recalls mechanization in the mines and the tactics employed by members of the UMW.

Interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Rex Rhodes for the Oral History Office on December 21, 1972. Kay MacLean transcribed the tape; Dan Horton edited the transcript.

John Fancher was born in Belle Ellen, an Alabama coal mining town, on February 7, 1899. He began working in the mines when he was ten years old. He moved to Herrin, Illinois in 1920 after being black-listed at the recently organized United Mine Workers of America mines in Alabama. Mr. Fancher worked in southern Illinois mines until he was barred from the United Mine Workers union for 99 years for opposing John L. Lewis' administration of the union. In 1931 he moved to Springfield, Illinois to seek employment in mines then under contract with the anti-Lewis "White Card" or "Fishwick" faction and later became a member of and organizer for the Progressive Mine Workers union.

Mr. Fancher's memoir includes his recollection of the miners' automobile caravan to Mulkeytown, Illinois in 1932, and events which took place in Springfield and central Illinois during the mine wars of the 1930's including the ambush of non-union miners at the Peerless Coal Company mine and a gun battle which took place between members of the two unions at the Easter Sunday, 1935 meeting of the Progressives.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is

John Fancher, December 21, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

Rex Rhodes, Interviewer.

Q. Mr. Fancher, could you give me a little bit of your background, your age and where you were born and so forth to bring us up to date?

A. I was born on February 7, 1899. At the present time I am approaching 74 years of age. I was born in a little coal mining town of Belle Ellen, Alabama. I had the misfortune to loose an eye at the early age of nine and I started work at the coal mines when I was ten. The wages paid then was nothing comparable to the wages paid today because my wages then was eighty cents a day for ten hours. That's eight cents an hour. I worked in the coal mines for approximately 25 years before I eventually left them.

Q. When did you move to this area?

A. I came to Illinois in 1920, just prior to the Herrin Massacre that taken place in 1921.

Q. Did you move to Springfield or to Herrin?

A. No, I was at Herrin. I didn't come to Springfield until 1931.

Q. The Herrin Massacre would be a good starting point, I think, for our talk about coal mining and the union war. Do you recall that?

A Well, not too vividly, but some parts of it. I was working prior

to the Massacre--this was before they became on strike--at a coal mine called Wasson that was about, oh, a couple miles across the interurban track from the Lester Strip Mine where the riot occurred, you see. And the riot was the riot which concentrated on the Lester Strip Mine in that operation in there. I worked around Herrin, Marion and West Frankfort up until the time that John Lewis (laughter) and I disagreed. Then I came to Springfield.

Q. It was said by many people that Lewis contributed a great deal to the massacre that happened down at Herrin, that he was instrumental in this. Do you have any recollection of how he participated in this?

A. No, I couldn't say because at that time I was not close enough in the miners' organization in that vicinity to be able to make a positive statement to that effect. But I do know that the union gave both financial and moral support to the individuals that was indicted for participation in that thing after it was settled.

Q. Where were you when the fight took place between the scabs and the miners that surrounded the Lester Mine?

A. Well, I was visiting at that time; I was not in Herrin at that particular time.

Q. What was the mood of the community down there?

A. The mood of the community, prior to the riot, was very vindictive toward the company. After the riot there was more or less a period of calmness; in other words, the people didn't want to discuss it.

They'd taken the attitude [that] as soon as it could be forgotten, the best.

Q. You moved to Springfield in 1931, you said.

A. Yes.

Q. Do you recall Glenn Young and the Ku Klux Klan down there . . .

A. Very much.

Q. . . . and the Shelton Boys and Birger?

A. Yes, I worked in the mine at Peabody 18 with LeRoy Price--that was before he was on the State Police--the two Thomasson boys that was indicted and convicted for the murder of the mayor of West City. What was his name? I can't recall it.

Q. Joe, I forget. . . . Adams, wasn't it?

A. I think that was it. The two Thomasson boys--one of them was a motorman and one was a trip rider--was pulling coal off of me at the time that they was connected with the Birger outfit.

Q. Oh, they were working as coal miners?

A. Working as coal miners and they was, in other words, moonlighting I guess you would call it. (laughter) And LeRoy Price, before he went on with the State Police, he was working the same mines with us. They later killed him and dumped his body in one of the old mines in between Johnson City and Marion.

Q. So LeRoy, then, was acquainted with these fellows before he became a State Policeman?

A. Absolutely, absolutely, no question about it.

Q. Then he and his wife were killed and they were found later on. That was quite a story.

A. Oh, yes. Of course I can't remember the exact incident, but the talk about it was since described to me, you see.

Q. Were the Shelton boys working in that area at the time as coal miners?

A. Not as coal miners. No, they were more or less out in some wayside place running what we called a joint.

Q. Do you recall Glenn Young when he was down there?

A. Yes.

Q. Would you describe him and tell what he was and what he did?

A. Well, if you would judge him by his appearance, you would take him to be a very congenial type of individual because of his appearance and of the way he conducted himself publicly. Indirect, behind the scenes, he was a different type of individual. I seen him a number of times when he was on the indirect type of individual with two guns strapped on him and he didn't hesitate to say just exactly what he meant and what he would do. It was really a dangerous situation because the danger was the individual who was not involved on either

side of the controversy being caught in the cross fire. There's where the danger was at, you see. If they'd have eliminated each other, it wouldn't have been so bad, but the serious part was the individual not involved being caught in between.

Q. And that happened many times, that innocent bystanders were shot and killed.

A. Yes. And I think, if it's still there, his grave where he was buried--I know I passed it a number of times from Herrin coming to Johnston City--after he was buried and the concrete vault was put around the side there, you could see where somebody passed there and shot with either a pistol or a rifle and you could see the indentures in the concrete where it was damaged. (laughter) The feud was very, very bitter.

Q. Is the vault still down there?

A. I don't know. I haven't been down in that part of the country now in many years. I don't know whether it's still there or not. The last time I was down there a number of years ago it was still there.

Q. There was a story--probably just folklore--that Glenn Young escaped. He was a scab that participated in the Herrin Massacre and he got away, and he vowed that he would come back someday and get revenge, and he came back and in the form of an organizer and a fighter against crime and liquor and so on.

A. Well, that's news to me.

Q. Did you know John Marchiando down there, or did you meet him up here?

A. I knew him down there. See, at that time I was around West Frankfort, in that area, and I knew of John over in around the Valier area, but I didn't personally meet him until I came to Springfield.

Q. The participants down there in the gang war--Charlie Birger and the Shelton Boys and the Thomassons--were they World War I veterans?

A. That I don't know. That was one thing I wasn't too closely acquainted with. I passed their places. The Sheltons, I think it was, had a half-way house in between West Frankfort and Johnston City on the west side. It set back in a grove, and in between the highway and the grove there was a high fence. I was told--I never examined it--that that fence was lined with sheet steel something like they use in mine shakers, you know, flat steel that they use in mine shakers to shake the coal. Now, the Sheltons--that was before the feud got so bitter--run a place at Halfway. That was between Marion and Johnston City. It was a bootleg dive as far as I was concerned. I'd been out there; every time I was down at Herrin and used to drink, I'd go out there. You're never going to be treated any nicer as long as you kept quiet, but I never did challenge anybody. I was out there to get a drink and then when I got that I moved on. I used to drink, but I haven't drank in years.

Q. Yes, I understand they were just real congenial fellows; as long as you didn't have a dispute, you were okay with them. You moved up to Springfield in 1931. When did you first come in contact with John L. Lewis?

A. Well, my first bitter experience with John Lewis goes back to 1917. In Alabama at a little place named Garnesy Coal Mine, we were on strike in 1917--an independent strike. We didn't have any union, didn't belong to a union. We were on this strike fighting against an imposition that the coal company had imposed upon us where the loaders would [have to] add [to] their loads 275 more pounds for the ton. The company had imposed that as a penalty for the impurities that was in a car of coal. Those cars there--the average--weighed about thirty-five hundred pounds. In other words, the loader had to load 2275 pounds of coal to get paid for the ton, and we were on strike to remove that imposition.

Then the union come in and organized us, and brought us into the union. See, the miners of Alabama lost their strike in 1908 and didn't have any semblance of a union until 1917 when they begun to come in and they organized. We finally got that settled and went back to work. I don't recall just exactly the date, but anyhow they became on strike and there was an arbitrator by the name of Garfield, and the agreement was known as the Garfield Award which the companies in Alabama never did recognize or put into effect. We came on a strike in Alabama as a whole--the union that is--and we was on strike for quite a while and finally Lewis let us down and he sold us to the wolves. And many of us--many of the miners of Alabama, the natives of Alabama--had to leave the state because we couldn't get work and we couldn't find employment nowheres within the state. We were victimized, what they call blacklisted and victimized because of our union activities.

Q. Now when you say he let you down, how did he let you down, John?

A. He called the strike off and left us. We had been evicted from the

company property, the company houses, and many of us were living in tents back on private property. He called the strike off and left us out there, desperate, in that condition. My bitterness against Lewis started back in that period of time. It continued until in the latter part of the 1920's when I was at West Frankfort and he revoked our sub-district charter and set up a provisional type of government which was the beginning of his breaking up of the miners union in Illinois. Because of my opposition to him establishing a provisional government in our sub-district and taking a definite position against Lewis, I was thrown out of the miners union for 99 years down there-- that is United Mine Workers.

There was a move throughout Illinois along about that time to fight Lewis known as the White Card. They were organized here in Springfield. Well, a number of us who were victims of Lewis's tyranny, we lined up with the Fishwick, or the White Card faction. That's how I came to Springfield because this was under the White Card jurisdiction here, under the Howard Fishwick faction. They had a contract, and the miners all around here belonged to that faction, and I came to Springfield because I could get employment here.

After I was here for some time I received a letter from Lewis, or from the executive board in Indianapolis, saying I would have to come to Indianapolis on a certain date--which I can't recall--and stand trial for insubordination against the International union, which I had already been thrown out down there for 99 years and which he approved. So I just replied back to him that the distance from Indianapolis to Springfield was the same as it was from Springfield to Indianapolis

and that if he and the executive board wanted to try me, they could come to Springfield because I sure as hell wasn't going to Indianapolis. Of course, I was working here, and we continued to work under that until an agreement was reached between the two factions. Then we were reunited back into the mine workers before the 1932 court dispute on it.

Q. What was the purpose of this? Was it to give you a chance to get back into the union, or just to stack up more penalties on top of you?

A. The only objective that I could see was to try to break the spirit of an individual, in other words, make him submissive to Lewis. And that I won't do; if I've got it in for you or somebody else and I have justifiable reasons, I'm too damn bullheaded to submit. I was penalized, yes, for having kicked around--having to leave my family, and so forth--but I didn't yield to Lewis.

Q. He was trying to make an example out of you.

A. He was trying to make an example out of it, absolutely. And I just indirectly told him where to go to. In the letter I didn't mention any words but told him where to go to.

Q. And was this a personal letter from him?

A. It was a regular personal letter signed by him, as directed by the executive board which he run. I didn't hesitate about it because I'm just too independent, that's all.

Q. Where was this in Alabama where you first came in contact with Lewis?

A. It was in Garnsey. G-A-R-N-S-E-Y. That's about 35 miles south of Birmingham in what is known as (inaudible) coal fields.

Q. When did you come in contact with Mr. Lewis after you moved up here?

A. It was after we had been re-united in the United Mine Workers. The miners of Illinois had previously voted twice to turn down the contract which had been submitted to them for a vote. The third time there was people still using ice instead of coal, when they stole our ballots and took out down Sixth Street with the ballots in the car; and Lewis was here and conveniently signed a contract declaring emergency existed. Then was when the break was started.

Q. Could you describe how that stealing of the ballots happened?

A. We had suspected that something like that was going to happen, so we had watchers. The ballots were being counted in the mine workers building; that's on Monroe Street, at Fourth and Monroe. We had watchers to watch to see that the ballots was properly counted and no skullduggery was used. Those fellows who were counting the ballots of the Lewis vote, when they taken the ballots out of the vault that morning, instead of going up the stairs they came out and came through the alley-- that alley is between Monroe and Capitol and runs east and west--and a car picked them up right at the alley on Sixth Street, and headed south. Our watchers were watching all along in the area; we had watchers in there.

Q. Were the ballots being held in a vault in a bank?

A. In the vault in the basement of that miners' building. There's where the ballots were being held, you see, until they was all counted. Instead of them going upstairs where the miners' headquarters and everything was, they went out through the alley and then they came out on Sixth Street right at the alley; I think that's the Leland Hotel beyond that alley. There was a car conveniently located and waiting for them to step right in and they took out Sixth Street, and that's when the alarm was given. That was the beginning of the Progressive Mine Workers Union because it riled up the miners of Illinois and it begun.

Then the Mulkeytown march developed. I know we lined up here at Iles Park one morning and organized a march. The demonstration was not intended to be abusive or anything of that nature; it was to show the miners in Franklin County that we were organized solid here against that kind of business. We were delayed a few times on route before we got down to that area, which now I think was [done] deliberately on the part of the officials in order to get properly organized to meet the caravan; and we were turned back. I expect Joe has given you the picture of that--the Mulkeytown march.

Q. Yes, but I would just as soon hear it from you, too.

A. I was in that march; I was in the group. When the firing started I left the car and (inaudible) was on the side of the highway was a bunch of weeds (inaudible) and I managed to get my car out of the caravan and went back this direction. I turned around right on the hard road. I had a small car, just a little Chevrolet, and I turned it around on that highway and got back this way then. But it's just

a wonder that a lot of people didn't get killed trying to get their cars moved (inaudible). But, there was no intention on our part. We were told here by those--I was not in the leading group here, you know, just a new member and taking a part a little later on--and we were told by those who organized the march, or caravan, to take no weapons of no kind. The only weapons we had was something we could eat because we knew we was going to be gone for a couple of days. When they did that, then that just simply agitated the situation completely. That was enough. That's when we began to form the new organization. My local union was Local Number 12, that was one of the first that was formed and broke away from the United Mine Workers.

Q. That was here in town?

A. Yes, and that's when I began to take an active part, in this area here, against Lewis.

Q. The stolen ballots had to do with the \$5.00 wage that they were voting on?

A. I was working at No. 59--that's out here by the stock yards--and my wage at the time the contract had expired was \$8.05 for eight hours a day. If my memory serves me right, I would have been reduced around \$2.00 a day, at my wage. I'm not saying that as a positive statement, but if my memory serves me right, that's what my reduction would have amounted to. And the miners of Illinois had voted that contract down twice before and this was the third ballot they had taken. Lewis was in Springfield, conveniently located here, to sign

the emergency contract when people were still using ice instead of coal when the ballots were stolen.

Q. When you say they were using ice instead of coal . . .

A. It was still in the summertime, see. The weather didn't demand emergency; you see the point?

Q. Yes. I heard a story--this might again be fictitious--but there was a time when Lewis was in the Leland Hotel and his people had to slip him out in a laundry cart.

A. (laughter) Yes, I heard it.

Q. Was that the time?

A. That I don't know. I've heard that story, but I don't know the accuracy of it.

Q. Then the Progressive Miners were formed early in September, 1932. Were you down at Gillespie when they were formed?

A. No, I was active in the local headquarters here.

Q. What happened as soon as the Progressive Miners were formed? How was the organization set up?

A. Well, of course, it was something that was new and in the beginning they elected a temporary president, vice-president, secretary-treasurer to start to make arrangements to hold a regular election. That election was held very shortly; I'd say around December of 1932,

if my memory serves me right, when that election was held. And then there was elected permanent officers for a two year period and board members for each board member district. Our board member district here was Number Four. There was a district around Taylorville, I forget just exactly what it was. There was another one in southern Illinois, around Bellville and in through that area. Different districts had different board member numbers. A campaign was started to try to show and to convince those who were not with us to join with us.

Q. How successful was that?

A. We didn't make too much headway through here; we did make some headway in some of the other states. Because here it seemed like everytime that we tried to do something--particularly in southern Illinois, around West Frankfort and in through that area there--that the pressure was too great. I know I went into the Danville district and I worked up in there for a while to try to do something and I worked with a former board member of the United Mine Workers who had become disillusioned with them, Peter Markelonis I think he was named--Peter Markelonis. And Pete and I, we did make some headway but the pressure was so great we couldn't accomplish anything because a lot of people doesn't realize that we were not only fighting the operators and Lewis's organization--the influence of Lewis's organization in Illinois--but we had the federal government against us.

I don't know whether Joe told you or not, but I would say in connection with the situation that our representatives--I wasn't in Washington at the time, they told me--but our representatives were told by Madam Perkins, who was then Secretary of Labor, and General

Johnson, director of the NRA--that's the National Recovery Act--that the government preferred and would only recognize one miners union and that miners union was not ours, it was the United Mine Workers.

Q. So they flat out told you?

A. Flat out told us, absolutely. Both men who were present at that time, that's Claude Percy and Bill Keck, both are dead. But, we discussed many times how stunned they was when two people of such high standing would be so abrupt in telling them to get the hell out of there, "We're not going to do anything with you." That was what we were up against; we were up against not only the coal operators who were in conspiracy with Lewis, but there was a conspiracy--and I'll say it but I can't prove it--of the three combinations in government. The operators, Lewis, and certain individuals who were in the government. So we were doomed as far as that was concerned. We tried and tried and tried, and that's why I told you the other day that this was the first honest election the miners union has had in fifty years. If we had been able to get a free and uninterrupted election back in them days, we'd have beat Lewis.

Q. Lewis purported that the coal miner needed strong central leadership and the coal miner could not go on his own, he had to have a strong central figure leading him.

A. Yes, that was his theory. A dictatorial tyrant. That was Lewis's personality; he was a dictatorial tyrant.

Q. He just didn't give the coal miner much credit.

A. No, he didn't figure the coal miner had intelligence enough to govern himself.

Q. Do you think he really believed that?

A. Yes, I do because he was the type of individual who if he thought certain things strong enough and hard enough it become a reality with him.

Q. Well, it's a documented fact that the United Mine Workers and Lewis gave the Democratic party in excess of \$500,000 contribution for the 1936 election. It would seem that this would have a great deal of influence with the federal government. Is there any indication of contributions prior to the 1936 election by the United Mine Workers?

A. As far as I know, I couldn't say. It's a supposition on my part that there was, but I can't prove it.

Q. That's a lot of money, especially during the Depression years.

A. Yes. If there was nothing prior to that, that was probably the repayment for what they had done prior to the 1936 convention.

Q. There was a lot of activity here in Springfield. I did an extensive search through the headlines in the newspapers in 1932, 1933, 1935 to see what happened during this period of time. There were a lot of bombings in Springfield, a lot of bombings in the Taylorville area and a lot of activity in the southern part of the state. It seemed like, though, that they didn't happen simultaneously. It seemed like it

happened in Springfield then it would move to southern Illinois, or it would move to Taylorville and it didn't happen concurrently. Now this might be a bad supposition, can you see where this would be true, or not?

A. I know that there was a lot of turmoil, a lot of that sort. It was true, there was a lot of it going on (inaudible).

Q. Taylorville was in the captive mine area?

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. There was what was called the Midland Tract over there, and that was Taylorville, Tovey and . . .

A. Kincaid, and Jeisyville and Bulpitt and all along that Midland area.

Q. Why was it so hard for the Progressives to get into this and form a union in this area?

A. They formed a union practically solid, that is the miners of Taylorville were practically solid to begin with in the Progressives. And the mines that operated in that area after this was with imported labor. And that was why there was so much commotion down there because that was all, practically all, imported labor. The original miners of the Taylorville district, or the Midland, were out with the Progressives.

Q. There was a march very early in the mine war activity, I guess maybe in September or October, into Taylorville, and pretty soon the National Guard was called, I believe, and from that point on it was hard to

get in there because the National Guard was there all the time. Can you recall that?

A. Yes, I recall that. I was chairman of the state strike committee. We organized that as propaganda. We knew we couldn't go down there. (laughter) We organized that as propaganda in order to make Peabody spend money, and the others to spend money. The reporters never could locate me; I was here in the Springfield office all the same time, but I wasn't dressed up with no collar and tie on, just usually maybe a blue shirt and a pair of overalls or something like that. They came around the office there which was located at 848 East Washington; it was in a store building, and it was our local headquarters. Then we moved up into Sixth and Washington. I forget what was the name of it now, but it has been redecorated and remodeled and everything. We moved up there.

I laughed. The reporters would come around there trying to find out who Fancher was. Well, the other fellows--like McFalling and Humphrey, who was state vice-president, and those fellows--they would say, "Well, he hasn't showed up yet." And I was setting in the office all the same time. (laughter) We knew that we couldn't get in but we wanted to make it as (inaudible) for them as we could, and so we put this propoganda out that we were going to organize here, and in southern Illinois in the Belleville district, and as far as Peoria in that end.

Q. Did they have a lot of troops?

A. Oh, they had a lot of troops. They had them lined up from the

intersection here on [Highway] 66 clear on into the intersection down here at the (inaudible).

Q. Is that right! How many would that be?

A. Oh, my I don't know. They had them stationed all up and down there in addition to all their deputies and so forth. It was like going into an armed camp.

Q. Well, there was activity before that. I was talking to Spizz Singer and he said he was caught up in a parade over in Taylorville one day and this was at the very beginning of the whole thing.

A. Yes. That was before things got really tough. There was some marches in there. There was a solidarity march. That was before things really got tough and they got antagonistic toward us. Yes they was; there was quite a bit of that marchings and gatherings and speakings and so forth down there. It was later they got tough and had us to move out, you see.

Q. They just refused to allow Progressives to come in at all?

A. Yes.

Q. How do you deal with a situation like that?

A. Well sir, if we had known, we probably wouldn't have lost. (laughter)

Q. You say lost. I asked this question when I talked to the editor, Mr. Curtis Small, down in Harrisburg. I don't know if you know him or not.

A. No.

Q. Well, I asked Mr. Small who won the war and he said, "Down here, the Progressive Miners did."

A. They're still Progressive down there, you see. It's just a small number, now. I think that's about the largest group that they have left in the state, it's right in that area.

Q. Those are good mines down there, aren't they?

A. It's a low type of coal; it isn't as high as it is around Springfield, but it's a good grade of coal. I think that's about the largest group the Progressives have left in Illinois.

Q. Why did they stay so firmly Progressive there when they diminished in other areas?

A. Well, economic conditions in other areas is a contributing factor. Mines shutting down, see, and so forth where those mines are still operating. Now, around Gillespie the mines shut down; around Belleville, the mines shut down. And there's no other mines to go to. Economic conditions was a factor there.

Q. I would like to jump ahead a little bit in the progression of events during the mine war. Were you at the Easter Sunday, 1935 meeting . . .

A. Yes.

Q. . . . where Ed Mabie was shot and killed and Art Gramlich and a

few others were shot?

A. I was chairman of the program and was on the platform when the commotion started and I ran to the window and looked down and saw part of it.

Q. What happened?

A. This car had been reported to us that it had been circling around the block for some time, see. When the meeting broke up and people started filing out, they happened to come along about that same time and they got caught in the traffic. And somebody made some kind of remark and they came out--out of the car--and when they stepped out of the car, then the fellows on our side that had no use for them--they hated their guts, just singularly speaking hated them--they also stepped up. There was one fellow, he's dead now--I can say true because he's dead--if his automatic hadn't jammed, Ray Edmundson wouldn't be alive today. But he was using a .45 automatic and it jammed. My youngest boy, he was with me and he ran to the window as I did, and when I saw what had happened, I threw him back to keep him from trying to see it but he did see part of it.

Q. There was one man killed, Ed Mabie, and several others were injured. How long was the gun battle? Was it very long?

A. No, no. It was very short. Because there were so many women and children on the streets. They ran; when they saw that they were caught in the jam, they ran--Ray Edmundson and those others. The fellows that was prepared for events of that kind--of course Mabie was killed,

Snyder's gun jammed, and some of the others was trying to look after Mable and Glenn Stufflebeam, he was also injured. And that's it, it was very short.

Q. There was a lawyer in the car, wasn't there? A United Mine Workers attorney from Indianapolis, a 71 year old man? I read the newspaper account of it.

A. It seemed to me like there was somebody else--there was Edmundson, the Thomasson boys . . .

Q. The newspaper said Fred Thomasson was there, but there wasn't mention of another Thomasson. Were there more than one?

A. I think there was. If my memory serves me right, I think there was two of them and Ray Edmundson and there was somebody else. Now who that other fellow was--I don't know whether he was a lawyer or whether he was just one of their comrades. I don't know, but it seemed like there was somebody else involved; you're right on that.

Q. I think he was shot in the foot or the toe. He was wounded just very marginally. What happened to Edmundson? He got out of town some strange way.

A. He got out of town and was located, I think, the next day or gave himself up the next day or the second day after that. Oh, it was pre-arranged, of course. There was concerns, no doubt, and they had their getaway cars all ready. That's a smart thing.

Q. This never did make it to trial, did it. Why not?

A. That's another one of those \$64 questions: Why the Progressives didn't get justice from the law as they should have got.

Q. There was some law enforcement people that didn't pursue it and didn't take it into trial. You're indicating that someone could be bought here in town, evidently.

A. There was something or another. Just what and where, I don't know.

Q. Was it officially dismissed, just dropped, or what?

A. I was trying to rack my memory to see if I could recall just exactly. I don't think there was any official announcement of it. I think they just let it lapse by a period of time.

Q. And they were out on bond, I guess, during this period of time?

A. Yes.

Q. What happened after that? Was Ray Edmundson reinstated as the provisional District 12 president of the United Mine Workers, or was that it for him as far as being associated with the United Mine Workers?

A. Well, you got me here. I just don't recall right now what the . . . I think, though, that he continued. It's been so far back that I can't recall just right off hand, and be factual about it.

Q. Getting back to the mine wars in southern Illinois, I jotted down some information from newspaper articles. The mayor of Zeigler allowed the Progressives to come down and hold meetings and so forth and all of a sudden he asked for troops because he said that Sheffiff

Robinson disarmed the entire Zeigler police force. Now, this was in March 29, 1933. Evidently the mayor of Zeigler was supporting the Progressive miners. Do you recall this?

A. No, I don't. There was so much that happened at that particular time throughout the state that I can't recall that particular incident.

Q. The governor didn't allow the troops to come down there; he vetoed that. Evidently Progressives were not allowed to have their meetings free from harrassment by the sheriff down there. Then pretty soon a judge in Pinckneyville, on April 20, 1933, issued a restraining order against several sheriffs--I think there were five--not to molest the Progressive Mine Workers. On April 21, three sheriffs agreed to ignor the writ; then shortly after that, I think the judge called several of the sheriffs in and Sheriff Robinson was one of them. They really never did follow the judge's dictates to leave the Progressive miners alone. Do you recall any of this happening down there?

A. It seems to me like I can recall something of that nature. I know I was in Pinckneyville at one time and things were pretty touchy--it was a touch and go proposition as to just what was going to happen because of the turmoil and the feelings that existed. But just who the judge was and the sheriffs and so on, I can't recall at this time.

Q. That was pretty arrogant for the sheriffs to ignore this and say they weren't going to abide by this.

A. Well, that's true. Well, all the way through it was arrogant for the sheriffs to take the position they did because I recall one time

I arranged for a meeting in Williamson County. I called the sheriff up before I arranged for the meeting and talked to him about it and he said, "Absolutely, go ahead and arrange for a meeting and we'll see you're not molested." So just a few days before the meeting was to have been, he called me and told me I had to call it off. I asked him why. He said it was none of my damn business. That was the sheriff of Williamson County; I can't recall his name. Now this was, I think, around 1934. He never would give me any reason why he refused to let us go ahead with that meeting. (Phone rings and tape stops and starts again)

Q. John, there's another incident I'd like to ask you about. There was an ambush out at the Peerless Mine here in Springfield. I guess it was 1933 or 1934 when it happened. There was a big gun fight there at the time. Do you recall this?

A. Yes. It was in 1933.

Q. Can you recall what happened? The events surrounding that:

A. Well, it was early in the morning. There was a lot of gun fire. They had some troops and they hightailed because it was so hot. But some of the coal miners who had been imported in here did get shot, and they were injured. I don't think there was any of our people injured because they slipped in, in the night, and hid under cover along side of the road. No one suspected that they was there until the thing burst loose.

Q. When was that in 1933? Can you recall the date?

A. No, but it was in the wintertime because I know it was foggy.

Q. Was there any previous skirmish out at that mine before that?

A. Oh, yes. Several of them.

Q. What was the problem with that particular mine?

A. Well, they were working their mines with imported labor.

Q. Where did they come from--the scabs?

A. All over the country. At that time there was a very small percent of the original employees working at that mine. Oh, I'd say there was ten or twelve of the original employees working at that time. They were all imported labor.

Q. Who owned that mine?

A. Peabody.

Q. Who was the manager?

A. The manager at that time was, I think, Louis Walden. I think he was the mine superintendent.

Q. One man told me he knew there were at least two thousand rounds fired that day and that after the shooting the smoke stacks burned black smoke--black as tar--for three days after that. He surmised that they burned bodies up in that furnace out there.

A. Well, that I couldn't say. I know the situation was very critical at that time.

Q. But there were officially no deaths.

A. Well, the only thing that I can recall was hearing all the reports of who had been shot. saying, "one of those goddamn Progressives" had shot him in the leg (inaudible).

Q. I think it was miraculous that no one was killed in the Mulkeytown battle.

A. Oh, yes, that was a miracle.

Q. A man had his tongue shot off, didn't he?

A. I don't know just where that fellow was from, but I think it was down southwest of here, around Belleville area. Just who he was I can't recall, but it was not a Springfield man.

Q. You indicated how John Lewis was back in 1918; as you looked at him in 1930, could you see a change in his disposition, his demeanor, his tactics? Was he even more forceful than he was in the beginning, or a little smoother? Did you see any change?

A. Yes. He was more forceable and more vindictive in his act and his attitude. It seemed like as time went on he increased in his vindictive attitude.

Q. Lewis had no formal education, but he could quote scripture, verse, and Shakespeare and anything else . . .

A. You've got to give him credit for that part of it; he was a self-educated man and he was a forceful speaker. And, I've seen him pacing

on a platform just back and forth like a cat in a cage. When he was, particularly, reaming somebody out about shortcomings or something of that kind, oh, he could just really be vicious in his attack. He was restless, worried, walking back and forth on the stage, when he was really bearing down on somebody.

Q. Can you recall when he would come to town?

A. No. Oh, I would hear some newspaper reports sometimes that he was in town but. . . . He was a fellow that I despised so until I just simply didn't care to look upon his face. It was over a long period of time, and to me it was that ingrown into me that I couldn't get rid of it. The man's dead now; I hate to say that, but that's just the way I felt.

Q. He had body guards when he came to town, didn't he?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. His mother had a house out on West Lawrence?

A. Yes. He had a house there, too. His home, wasn't it on West Lawrence, right next to his mother's?

Q. Was that house guarded?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. He appointed his daughter, later on, as the president of District 50, I think it was.

A. To catch all the CIO.

Q. Yes. What happened to her, to Kathryn?

A. I don't know what . . .

Q. She died early.

A. I don't know what ever happened to her. I think you're right. I think, if my memory serves me right, she did die. I'm not sure on that, but I think so.

Q. Yes, he was feared by a lot of people. Can you recall any time when there was any attempt on his life?

A. Specifically, no, I can't.

Q. As you look back now, John, if you had it to do over, what would you do or what wouldn't you do as far as unionism is concerned, and mining and the mine war?

A. That's a problematical question. (laughter) Well, as far as taking the position against the tyranny of Lewis, or any other mine man in the miners union, I would take the same position because I don't beleive in it. In so far as the activity is concerned, there might be a change in what did take place, of trying to be more forceable-- not forceable, I'll qualify that--but trying to be more persuasive, rather, of the other fellows to try to get it. But as far as backing away from a fight when you're disfranchised, I would never do that. I would take the same position now as I took then. Because any time you're going to take my right to vote and express my view and opinions through the American way of voting, then you get my danders up and I'm

ready to fight. Even at 74.

Q. Well, you might say that Arnold Miller is standing on your shoulders. If it wouldn't have been for you and people like yourself . . .

A. I don't want to be pegged for simple bragging, but that is fact. Arnold Miller, today, is reaping the rewards from our efforts because the seeds were sown years ago and finally now we're seeing success.

Q. Do you think he is going to have a rough go of it?

A. Yes he will; unless he can clear out all those provisional board members and those provisional officers that Lewis and Boyle have appointed throughout the miners union, he's going to have a rough road. And when he tries to unseat them, it's going to be rough, too, because he's going to have to bring in the federal government in order to do it because they're very well entrenched. You could see that in recent action when Boyle resigned when they gave him the \$50,000 a year pension and the poor son of a gun that makes it possible is getting \$150. Now there's no justice there. There's no man--I don't give a darn who he is or how intelligent he is--that's worth any \$50,000 a year pension when the poor suckers at the bottom is just getting peanuts.

Q. During this period that the United Mine Workers reigned, the number of employees in coal mining decreased. Mechanization took over during this period of time. What do you think the role of a union is with regards to employees versus mechanization--union members versus mechanization. Which comes first?

A. Mechanization, there's no question about it. You spoke of the decrease in the miners union. I can recall in 1920, I think records will show, we had approximately 550,000 dues paying members in the miners union around that particular time. That didn't include the non-union miners which was a considerable number. In 1932 when the fight really started in Illinois against Lewis, that number had dwindled down--the dues paying members--to just something over 100,000 and the majority of them was from Illinois. Lewis had repeatedly taken a position of no backward step. At the same time mechanization was taking over and eliminating the coal miners. As to determine between the two, which should survive, is a hard question. You can't stop progress, yet humanity must be given some consideration.

Now, I know one time I was chairman of the resolutions committee in a convention of the Progressives in which we had a number of resolutions which were demanding an increase in wages, a number of resolutions which were demanding equalization of wages. In other words, demanding that the low man be brought up to the high man, and that the high man be still increased to a greater figure. The committee I was on--myself as chairman of the committee--we substituted a resolution for the whole in which we requested that a substantial increase be made to the low man to bring him up to the high man and consideration be given to preserving the industry, which automatically eliminated the resolution demanding a higher increase in wages. I taken the position that we should try to preserve our industry, preserve our employment, instead of trying to force our industry out of and off of the American market. I thought they was going to throw me out of the damn hall for a minute or two. Today they can see their mistake, but today

it is too late. They continually advocated a higher wage and everything like that, and today mechanization has eliminated coal miners.

Q. Weren't some of the contracts made with the coal companies on the ton mined, instead of the men that's mining the coal? Wasn't it predicated on tons of coal mined whether it be by manpower or machine power?

A. If it was, that was after my leaving and not being active in the miners union. The only differentials that I recall was in the Harrisburg district. It was 1932 and the Progressives inherited it. There was a differentiation between the contract that was applicable to the northern part of the state with that of the southern state because of the low coal and other conditions down there. There was a differentiation there.

Q. They were being paid a smaller wage in the southern part of the state weren't they?

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. Because of lower grade coal?

A. It was because of the operation of the (inaudible), not because of lower grade coal. It was a high grade coal, as far as that was concerned; but because of the operation of the industry, there was a difference in the wages.

Q. Do you recall that in the 1920's a millionaire came in from the Chicago area and he built this mine and built the whole town of Zeigler

up? It was just a modern type mine and he brought scabs in, I think, from outside the field.

A. No, that was before my time when I was in West Frankfort.

Q. Well, John, do you have anything you'd like to say in closing?

A. Well, referring back to the question you ask me some time ago about the turmoil that existed in Springfield and Taylorville and down through the southern part of the state at different times. I know that I was able to contact the secretary of the local sub-district in Harrisburg--it was in the 1930's--and to get the check stubs which they had paid out for different acts in which Progressives were getting blamed for it. I met him at a little tavern on the banks of the Ohio River one night. He gave me these check stubs, I drove practically all night from the time I left before I got to Springfield to where we could make photostatic copies of every one of those check stubs. Then I had to get them back to him the following night. On those stubs it was stipulated that a certain job would have been done and the Progressives were getting the blame for them.

I met him and he slipped these check stubs out. Of course, him and I had previously worked together in the mines in southern Illinois; I knew him, and he knew me. Of course he was a member of the United Mine Workers and I was a member of the Progressives, but we were friends even though we were on different sides of the fence; and he slipped these out of the office and turned them over to me, so that we could make photostatic copies and have them for our records.

Q. How much money was involved?

A. Thousands of dollars.

Q. And they were for jobs such as what?

A. Blowing up bridges and this and that and various (inaudible), which they paid for and we got the blame for.

Q. Was that ever brought into court?

A. No. The attorneys couldn't use it at that time, and it was later decided not to use it.

Q. By the attorney?

A. Yes.

Q. I wonder why?

A. I think the attorney (laughter) of the Progressives at that time had too much knowledge of what was going on there because he was from southern Illinois and he had been hired by the Progressives after his term in office down there. I think he knew too much about it, and I think he didn't want to get embarrassed. That's my opinion.

Q. So as a result there were about 36 or 38 men that went to prison?

A. That's right.

Q. Where did they send them to prison?

A. Some went to Atlanta, Georgia, some went to Leavenworth, some went to Minnesota, some went to up in Michigan. I think there is a federal institution in Michigan and some went there.

Q. How long is this term in prison?

A. Two years.

Q. How were the men treated when they were in prison versus the other hardened criminals that were in there at the time?

A. From my knowledge that I've been able to find out, they were treated more like political prisoners than criminals, not considered criminals because . . .

Q. That exactly is what they were, political prisoners.

A. The authorities recognized what the situation was and from what I can find out they were treated more like political prisoners than criminals.

Q. What moved Roosevelt to cut the term short? He did this, didn't he? Didn't he commute the sentences?

A. No, the sentence was cut short by parole and then, see, each man had a \$10,000 to \$20,000 fine against him and that was wiped clear and citizenship was restored to practically all. I think it was about maybe two to which complete citizenship was not restored. But that was under Truman.

Q. Who were the two that citizenship wasn't given back to?

A. Well, I'm not sure. Let's cut that off for the time being. (Tape stops and starts again)

Q. As you're looking at the present state of affairs of unionism and

coal mining here in Illinois and the United States, what do you think the future is?

A. For unionism as a whole, or just miners union?

Q. Well, say miners union now.

A. Well, it has been often said that John Lewis was one of the greatest salesmen for oil and gas that the country has ever known. (laughter)
I think that saying still stands true today because oil and gas is beginning to become short. It looks like we're going to have to go back to coal, and that coal is either going to come from this country or some other country. And if the miners of this country and the mine operators makes it impossible for the people to buy coal mined here, they're going to buy it somewhere else. You can go in any store today, regardless of what kind of store it is, and look at the merchandise. It's made in foreign countries in competition to American industry and American workmen. That lesson should be understandable that the American workman is pricing himself out of and off of the American market. And unions did this. I'm a union man, as far as that is concerned, and believe in the principle of union, but today a lot of our unions are not controlled by the old type of union leader. They're controlled by some racketeers, and they're ruining the union and the economy of the country in so doing.

Q. Do you think Miller can overcome this?

A. He's going to have to; if he saves the miners union and the coal mining industry, there is going to have to be a stabilization because we cannot continue the inflationary way in which we've been. If

everybody was in that inflationary sphere it wouldn't be so bad, but unfortunately all are not in that and those who are not in there are the ones who are being hurt today and the ones that have got to be given consideration.

Q. Do you have anything else to add to it? I don't, I'm out of questions right now.

A. No, I don't. I'm not much at remembering dates, I can remember events that we could go into. Maybe later on I might think of something, but right now I don't.

Q. Well, I thank you very much for your time. I enjoyed the interview. This is a significant part of the program down at Sangamon State.

A. I don't know if I've given you any information that's valuable enough . . .

Q. You have.

A. . . . but what I have tried to give you is based upon facts to the best of my knowledge.

Q. Well, that's fine.

END OF TAPE