

CSEA HISTORY PROJECT

Extract of Video Interview with Irene Carr

Interviewer: You're probably the most influential woman in CSEA's history. Let's begin by telling us what makes Irene Carr tick.

Carr: Lots of things. CSEA has been very important in my life and very influential in the way things went for me. I started working in the district health office in 1948 -- came out of business college, but I worked at Hartwick College in 1943. Small, one building college.. they were good to me... got married, had a boy, got divorced... went back, made \$100 a month. Tough going. No benefits... had my appendix out and they paid for my time off.

I went out with a fellow whose sister worked at the health office. I applied for a stenographer job, took the test.. small office.. twenty people.. CSEA'S application was given along with your form. You just joined, no questions. Quite active supporter of the union there... it was not a union, an association.. joined to get the insurance. Meetings were held in the office.

Int: What did you get from CSEA?

Carr: We knew that they worked for raises for us. They used to have to go on bended knee... had a salary committee for years... somebody from region 2... you didn't expect much, it was part of the job. I was so busy... I didn't think too much about it. Less than \$3 a year dues.

Int: How did they collect the dues.. was it payroll deduction?

Carr: Yes... they did have payroll deduction. How they collected for health insurance -- the Blue Cross lady would pass the hat, so to speak.... every month. We got a reduced rate because we were a group. I worked there till 1957, then I transferred to Oneonta... they always called it SUCO. Many years ago it was called the normal school.... It's really SUNY now.

Only there a short time... on a promotional list -- offered a job at a tuberculosis hospital. I worked in the business office, .. I served as secretary and delegate, then I became president of the chapter, for 8 years, I got active in what was the conference which is now the regions. So I didn't get involved on state level until I was a delegate. Then, it opened up a whole new world.

Int: What kind of delegations...

Carr: The first one was in Buffalo... big group, at a hotel in downtown... they had baked Alaska... flaming, fascinated. Joe McDermott was there and got a backed Alaska plopped in his lap. Betty Duffy made a motion that they never go to Buffalo because she had to pay ten cents to go to the ladies room.

Then I got involved in the conferences. One time, a workshop with recorders.. asked me to be a recorder.. typed up the minutes. President was Ted Wenzel, he asked me to work in his office. Couldn't then. The chapter was a multiple unit ... lists different groups... we had officers ... small meetings... controversy between state university and Homer Foulkes. In 73 it closed -- the last TB hospital in the state. They renovated the children's hospital... used to have clinics ... had fun.. small group. Some celebration was my swan song as president... centerpieces, in 1975 they called .. the nominating committee called and asked me to run for statewide secretary. ... Let me digress... when I was region secretary, I was mostly quiet... so I didn't talk too much.. the Homer Foulkes closing was handled badly... I felt responsible... they heard coming to work they were losing their jobs. I talked about this.. they said we didn't know you could talk. Had to have a reason. Felt strongly... people didn't know their rights. The doctor wasn't tuned to the employees.... so my VP and I went to Albany and met with Senator Mason... talked to him, w hat people could do. Health Dept had a Veteran's home in Oxford.. but our people were turned away. After the chat, then they gave some of them jobs.

Many went to state university, some to the local hospital. Another problem... no benefits for months. The union started to grow... Wenzel appointed me to the social committee.. now the convention committee. We did things in a professional way, we made sure VIP's got

invitations.... we had conventions two times a year. It kept you busy. Got notoriety on a statewide level on that committee. I was a nervous wreck running for statewide secretary. I decided to do it right. Put together a flier, made a logo, campaigned. Came in second. Knew I wasn't going to win. In 1976 Dorothy died and... Ted Wenzel called and wanted me to be statewide secretary. Never been to aboard meeting.. Ted put on quite a show to get me elected. I was working at the college half time in geography and half in honors. They gave me a bad time about being in the union. The first meeting was at the Concord -- delegates and budget... Joe McDermott very helpful. No release time... I would go to board meetings every month... closet myself all weekend to get minutes done and get them out first of the week.... cut and paste... no tape.. Had my own first aid kit...got a tape recorder, started taping meetings. Pretty lonely.. learned a lot about parliamentary procedure. ...It was a two year term. In December of 76 broke my hip... on crutches... ran that year.. almost went to jail on crutches... staff on strike... I was management.. I was going along with the flow... learned that the president of the conference got copies of everything. I kept my mouth shut and listened. Officers meeting over on 9W, cussed and swore.. Dorothy had done what they told her to do. I left a couple of those meetings.. difficult.. so I bought a whistle and when I blew the whistle, got their attention. Friction between McGowan, Wenzel and Roemer, Wenzel shook his fist at Roemer... I didn't know what it was all about. In 77, Bill McGowan beat Wenzel/.

Int: What kind of staff services did you have.

Carr: Always temporary.. names some staff people... field persons....they were very helpful.

Int: What kind of expectations did you have back then....

Carr: Expected a lot of them. No release time. Nobody pressed the union very much... One of the things... housekeeping people -- women were required to work weekends, but not men. Same title. Went to bat, got that changed... never had any breaks. I had to work an extra half hour a day, so when you think of increasing pay, there wasn't much. You took your coffee to the bathroom and drank your coffee. ... Made the quality of the workday better. I did shorten the day to 7 and a half. They shortened the work week too. to 46, 44 and on down.

As I look back... people in the locals... they were small groups and handled their problems. The large groups to be concerned. Money and time.... a lot of people lived at the Hospital..... meals were taken out of check... when it closed it was difficult.... Most made out okay. They took some of them at the college but they didn't have to. No rights...

Int: The Wenzel-McGowan election.

Carr: Apparently there was a secret meeting in Syracuse, a stormy day, cold... Wenzel got wind of it... he went up and went around and found out who was there.. he was furious. That's why he was shaking his fist under Roemer's nose... thought he was instrumental. When I was local president the law firm was formed... we were in Rochester.. AFSCME was trying to represent us.. after that the law firm was formed. ...in 76 -- Landslide McGowan... beat him by 30 some votes. I wasn't in Albany at the time. Wenzel wouldn't let McGowan in the office. The recount.. McGowan won... Wenzel was supportive of me.. after 77 he wouldn't talk to any of us. August 1977 we went to a meeting in Syracuse.. Elvis was supposed to be there... that's when he died. In 77, there was a national conference of women in Texas... Bill thought I should go. Bella Abzug was there... fascinating... first time I saw the anti-abortionists....with placards of unborn fetuses... and there was the gay and lesbian issue.. we were observers.. attached ourselves to league of union women. I came back and started talking... all presidents were men whose wives didn't work. They weren't used to women talking. Irving said you never should have sent her. .. in 78 formed women's committee... I think that dissolved into the minorities committee. Spring of 78 we affiliated with AFSCME.

Let me go back and talk about office of statewide secretary... 77 to 79 -- they gave us 30 days leave. There was a desk around the corner, all the space there was. -- 33 Elk Street. Then they gave me space in the steno pool. I complained to the board... then space in computer dept...

finally a secretary.. couldn't understand why I needed one. Space small...Joe Dolan was the executive director then and you know what a chauvinistic pig he was... finally, we were out in the middle of the floor and thought they would punish me. I had more time... got to know staff.. put a beautiful oil painting on the wall... departments all around.. got to know them.. answer my phone.

Int: What were your responsibilities then?

Carr: I was involved with elections.. local and region and statewide.. worked closely records maintenance .. developed an annual report... attendance record for board of directors.. first time... registration process... committee.. sat down... worked out system they have today... improved on it... so much easier with computerization. ... Many times meetings, issue came up.. I fought to keep the subject file up to date.. today, just before I retired, they were computerizing it. We also had a hearing reporter.. she fed her minutes into a computer... and it's fed right into the system. I got them to put it on microfilm. boring work -- but they can put a great amount on them.

Int: How the role of secretary has evolved.

Carr: Joe McDermott came to me one day and said develop secretary training workshops... researched... developed format... before, during and after... trained... they were the ones asked to bring the donuts and coffee and didn't know they could make motions... asked for tape recorders... told them it was the backup...part of the board.. put together booklet.. got pins.. raised their consciousness. Told them they were probably the most important. We like to talk, it was a skill to listen. Don't stay at secretary.. run for other office. Proud secretaries became presidents.

Int: issues you've spoken out on.

Carr: ... Women's committee.. chair of it for a while.. I stepped down.. were ridiculed.. pay equity... was an issue in the country...about that time we joined AFSCME.. the state negotiated... tried to get formats for them to have meetings and conferences in the regions... presidents threw roadblocks in their path... I got involved in the child care issue. I got involved because people Barbara Reeves ... Mohawk hospital.. got money negotiated into the state contract. It was in the quality of work life money and Paul Lambert worked with that committee.. child care person at odds all the time... not much was happening. I went to McGowan and got involved. No documentation... swimming upstream. quasi public corporation... got some federal money... state didn't want to be in the business.. provided space, utilities... next time money was separate. No staff to begin with.. names names... child care assignment... she had her hands full... sorted it all out... we were able to hire some staff. I was liaison... a committee in a facility wanted child care... but it would be put together by management... wrong.. CSEA put in major amount of money... I was liaison between CSEA and Management.. the staff were more concerned with getting it started...helped them push the money through... be aware... facilities would drag their feet, and I got pretty adept at yelling at management. Over the years, we built it up to 50 plus day care centers. Over the years we were able to do something... major concern... didn't reach enough CSEA people. We were concerned with State University, but it was for students, and we were concerned about them pushing our people out. Negotiations...

Int: Let's talk about some of the other issues.

Carr: it was wonderful. I used to go with staff to see how things were going... registration.. CSEA children... one really pleased about.. corrections.. down in Fishkill.... director very supportive... volunteered some land, some trailers... in Wallkill they make modular units -- the prisoners... they finally opened it last summer.. 3 modular units employees from 7 correction facilities down there. We had a facility in Raebrook -- the director of that.. they made it into a prison.. director would give up his house... he would give it up for childcare center... committee invited me ... up to Hidden Valley ranch.. now owned by Paul Newman... all my justification... commissioner, deputy commissioner...names of chair...you know who I am, I don't know you. I said to the commissioner.. what's the matter, don't you like kids? He didn't know about it. Work with her, give her what she wants. Got opened faster than any other. That was the 3rd one. talks

about others. They invited me down to the opening last summer... the director at Fishkill.. asked for more. Hygiene has quite a few. Problem.. keeping the facilities up... budgets... see it regressing.

Talking about issues -- because of my clerical work.. I got involved in the CSEA SEAT program. ...like a bridging program.. got 300 jobs promoted into new titles.. union got some training programs together. Other issues: Ergonomics. Realize that our people all sitting in front of computers, began to be involved in what kind of furniture they had... carpel tunnel syndrome problems... learned the new word.. ergonomics. Began to get better furniture. Negotiated money in the contract... I was invited to go to Little Rock, Arkansas ... to speak at a State Computer Association... I was about as popular as a skunk at a lawn party because they didn't want to talk about furniture, but about computers and blondes sitting in front of them... didn't meet Clinton. 3 planes to get there... glad I had the chance... computer industry very slow... looked at each other... we ought to think about it... flyers... height of chair, width of seat, adjustment... food rest, tilt of screen, color of print.... fought with Dave Sparks about this....

Int.: Taylor law.. when things changed.

Carr: I was a local president... management confidential .. very nervous.. fought it.. hospital closed, I became administrative. Before Taylor, had to go on hands and knees... CSEA could not represent all the people in one group.. divided... administrative operational, institutional, management confidential, professional and scientific and correctional. So, the elections took place and corrections left, PS&T left... we still held on to the others. Negotiations different.. changed the picture... grew up and became a union.. became local, region... much more professional atmosphere when that happened. The designating of units... problem... we didn't always agree.. it worked out.. PERB appointed by Rockefeller to look at the issues. ... the whole picture changed... in 67. In 78 when we joined AFSCME.

Int. Talk a little about the AFSCME affiliation.

Carr: In 1978, PS&T left us. We were being challenged. it was costing a lot of money. Bill McGowan thought it would be good to affiliate. Meeting at Polish-American Club. I went up.. somebody said why aren't you in the officer's meeting. I banged on the door, I was furious. .. they expected me to just vote affirmative. .. Tom... was exec assistant.. took the blame.. forgot to invite me. I blasted all of them, I was invited to most things from then on. No one allowed to leave room... it passed.. opened up a new world. Convention in Las Vegas... officers went.. women's workshop.. later learned they had caucuses.. no workshop till Thursday... over the years we had some battles. .. I was elected a delegate each time to go to the conventions... Region president had control of whether a statewide office would be delegate .. didn't think that was right recommended a change.. automatic delegates.. two conventions before we got it through. Region presidents didn't want it.

Int: What about the AFSCME women's committee

Carr: We had three co-chairs on the first committee and it was a disaster. Personal concerns... not going the direction it should go... we had several different directors. When McAntee was elected, they got a department. Changed title... evolved into its own department.. go all over the country.. holding conferences and workshops... statewide workshop, AFSCME is there. got better and better.

Int: Chair of the committee:

Carr: 1984 till 1983. Talks about people who are on and talk to committee. Every other year... the year of no convention, women's conferences -- different sections of the country. Wonderful workshops.. statewide, also. Name...

Int: Changes.. salaries..

Carr: When I started, in 48, 50, I was earning \$2081.. in 1956 -- \$3,312. Retired in 1993 -- \$26,180. Average increase 249 dollars.. increments. 1910 to 1963 -- couldn't negotiate then... percentage increases.. salary committee.. NYC person president down there.. very involved...went

to legislative group each year... 1949 court of appeals case... thousands received \$3 million withheld... each time.. until Taylor Law, had to go on bended knee... won retirement privileges...eventually taken away.. can't do any more... citizen's group.. bitter about retirement benefits...52, \$10 million.... state workers.. we represented a lot of local government workers... had to work with locals... not familiar...Westchester first to join...

Int: Political activity -- Rockefeller to now

Carr: Drastic change... committee.. department.. lobbyists... cautious about what we supported.. job-related concerns -- board of trustees... delegates set aside money for political action.. AFSCME... people fund... in the hands of AFSCME .. very involved.. pays for federal lobbyists in Washington... lots to be proud of.

I had an opportunity to know Gov. Rockefeller. Got to know Cuomo.. federal congressman, state senator... lot of involvement with legislators... talk about concerns.. legislation... saving jobs, facilities.. met some of the women legislators.. women's committee workshops.. May Newberger.. assemblywoman. .from LI no pay equity law.. provision we got... get back into it // backfired on us... equal pay for equal work.. worked with her and her counsel.. never went anyplace.. changes backfired because the state did a review of a lot of the salaries -- raised clerical.. gave them generic titles... raise and that was it.. not a lot of opportunity. Info Proc Spec came in... then it kind of died... nothing more done... clerical force is the largest group.. didn't go any further.

Int: (unintelligible) Weren't you statewide secretary then?

Carr: Story about President Carter coming to convention in Niagara Falls -- she's in the hospital.. Doctor said you were crazy .. exciting.. secret service men.. I was the only woman on the dais with the president... Not going in in a wheelchair... have a picture of them walking me in... tempted to push me down some of those steps. Carter kind of short. Hospitable man, very nice..

Kennedy and Clinton.. you saw the clout we had... JFK just as handsome in person as in his picture. Clinton is very personable.. met them in Albany when he came to one of the colleges... we endorsed him. Going to the inauguration was a thrill of a lifetime. Seat up in front... movie stars.. Roseanne and her husband.. tremendous.. really exciting.

Int: Lots of changes in CSEA -- political action

Carr: I've seen progress.. we command respect in Albany and Washington. They're our bosses and you need to know them and express your concerns to them. We've come a long way.. informing members.. in this need. We don't like union telling us who to vote for. Not what we're doing.. supporting their jobs and their futures.. we've come a long way in that respect. Some resentment.

Int: Benefits

Carr: In 1979 we were able to negotiate money for a new contract.. brainstorm.. bill McGowan.. dental, hospital and prescription drugs. Elected by board as one of the first trustees.. quite excited.. Orlando Florida.. member.... trustee training.. heavy load... laws.. money has to be used for the membership.. exciting... increased our benefits.. unique.. other funds involved with pensions.. we were our own authority.. look at our balance sheets and increase ... glasses for people who worked on computers.. prescription allowances... some problem.. couldn't negotiate for retirees... done very well by the people.

Int: Two biggest changes?

Carr: I think the AFSCME affiliation.. each president... Wenzel, McGowan...and AFSCME, Joe.. buildings.. Each president has brought good things... the AFSCME affiliation the biggest change. Irving ... he felt there should be one local government person.. president... exec VP thought he should be there.. fought the battle.. got the third one in there. Now you have Danny, Joe, George... local government people by the wayside.

We had an interesting session when Gerry Worth died and the new president was going to be

elected... talks about AFSCME election... racial... Gerry won.. lot of controversy... came for support at the Concord.. special meeting.. asked all the fellows, nothing to me. I abstained.. if I had voted for Worth it would have been a tie vote. Next week I went , to Albany, everybody pounced on me... never abstained again. I just wanted to get out of there. President of region 2 threatened me if I didn't support Victor. In Washington, smoke filled room -- I was the only woman state wide officer until Barbara Bauser.. now it's 50%. A lot of women involved.. region.. men stepped in... a couple of women presidents... lady from Utica...

Int: Setting up regions

Carr: Restructuring committee.. local president then.. each convention, recommendations.. setting up regions.. felt CSEA wasn't representing people enough with one office in Albany. Based on what was previously called conferences.

Int: Personalities... who changed the union

Carr: Irving colorful.. AFSCME was giving a report.. gave them a notebook that thick.. Irving would put it on the table.. Region 2.. Sol.. character.. best interest at heart.. tight little group, people not involved.. in those dates.. predominately Jewish... very involved... went more toward blacks and now Hispanics. Region 3 Jimmy -- from the bridge authority.. Joe in region 4.. had a lot to do with changing the union... go to the print shop and see what was going on. He didn't ask a question unless he knew the answer. Ted Wenzel did a lot... I remember... he called a meeting in the 60's , talking about schools, and that was when we first started organizing. Nick LaMorte remembered Wenzel because he was instrumental in getting schools involved. Joe was a character. Region 6, Bill McGowan. Used to be funny when Bill became president, meetings in the conference... got a plate of donuts and pastries... .. ice cream sundaes. Over the years the faces changed... Frances was a character... I sat there waiting.. she came in with a huge brown paper bag, put containers down on the desk.. Chinese food.. called in communications person... everybody had their spoons... Regional offices have developed into nice offices.. something Joe had as a goal. Albany's a beautiful building. When Barbara came in... good person... good treasurer... set me back about 25 years with women's issues. Very conscientious.

Int: Let's talk about the future. What do you see as the concerns for the future.

Carr: I think we're going to see a decrease in membership. We have to deploy our forces to address that concern. With a Republican Governor for a long time.. serious concern... mental facilities.. state university...medical schools private... where it leaves our membership... contract... CSEA will always be a part of my life. I can't let go... call, talk.. it means a lot to me. I think we're going to have to work harder to represent our members.. If Clinton loses.... not going to be easy.

Int: Tell them anything you want --

Carr: They're involved. Be involved with your union. The average member doesn't get involved until there's a crisis... Hard job getting officers to run for election. The importance of what's going on on a day to day basis. ... What involvement do you have? I... It meant a lot to me to be involved. ... Retiree... meetings 60 miles away.... the most important thing is know what your union is doing for you. And if you don't like it, tell them so. They do read their letters... What are you going to do with it...Talk about labor songs.... credentials committee... ends with.. I was proud of the elections I ran... I got more votes than the president got... Being a public employee -- the state resents public employees... hardly anybody would talk to me... I would have given them a run for their money... women who were on there, they weren't very nice to me... (Why women don't support each other) Sexual Harassment, violence in the home -- AFSCME is very involved in that..

There's a funny story about going to that. The memorial service for women who were killed. My slip fell off... I never missed a beat, stuck it in my raincoat pocket. The fellows saw it, said don't put it in the glove compartment.. that old joke. When I got to the service, the gal who was the president of the local, I said I know it's a very sad day for you, but I[[ve got something to tell

you to make you smile.
It was a very tragic... *tape ends*