

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
YSU HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Michael Finney
INTERVIEWER: Heidi L. Scott
SUBJECT: YSU History
DATE: February 2, 2005

P: This is an interview with Michael Finney for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on YSU History, by Heidi L. Scott, at YSU on February 2, 2005 time is 1:15 p.m.

S: Before we discuss your involvement with the union, I'd like to get some background information. So, first could you tell me where and when were you born?

F: I was born in Anderson, Indiana on May 26, 1940.

S: Could you tell me something about your childhood?

F: It was impoverished. I was born just before WWII and, after the war when there was very little housing, we lived in either boarding houses or were boarded out until we moved to California in 1950. My parents were both factory workers at that time, although my father later went to law school. Moving to California was the most positive experience on my childhood. We literally moved from the slums of Indianapolis to a nice, suburban neighborhood in southern California. From a school that was surrounded by chain-link fence, to a school where all the doors opened up onto the playground. Things went better from there on.

MS

S: And, how did you end up in Ohio?

F: After I got my PhD in Iowa and my BA at Stanford, I taught in Boston for a few years, then I taught in South Carolina for a year, then my then-wife got a job at Kent State and we ended up here. That's how I ended up in this area.

S: What did your parents do for a living?

F: Okay, my father was a stock chaser ^{at} of Guide Lamp, which was a subsidiary of General Motors, and he was also a union rep at that time. My mother worked at Guide Lamp first, then she worked at RCA, and later she worked, in Indianapolis, making the first television sets that came on the market, and then later, when we moved to California, she worked for Douglas Aircraft for about thirty years.

S: Interesting. Could you tell me about your family? Do you have any children?

F: I have one son, ^{SHAWN} ~~Sean~~, who's 31.

S: Could you describe your educational background for me?

F: Yes, sure. I don't know where you want me to start, but elementary school in urban Indianapolis was not a particularly pleasant experience, although moving out to California ^{where} with progressive education was still in full-force, at least in the Long Beach School District, was like night and day. That persisted through high school. It was a very student-oriented, liberal kind of education. Then I got my BA from Stanford and then I got a fellowship to Iowa where I studied literature and linguistics, then I taught after that.

S: Prior to YSU, what work experience did you have?

F: I taught at Northeastern in Boston, well, I taught as a GA at Iowa, but I taught at Northeastern for three years. Then I taught at UMass, Boston for a year, then I taught at the University of South Carolina at Aiken for a year before I came here.

S: When did you come to YSU?

F: I came here in the fall of 1976. That year I taught part-time. The next two years I had temporary, one-year assistant-professor contracts, or instructor contracts. Then I was hired permanently in 1980.

S: Permanently as . . . ?

F: A ^{tenure} ~~ten-year~~ track position.

S: And, is that the same position you've held this entire time?

F: Well, I've gotten promoted.

S: Understandably so. Okay, now moving on to your involvement with the union. First, why do you think unions are important for higher education?

F: There are two ways to govern in higher education. One is through a powerful faculty senate, the other is through a union. Those places that do not have a powerful faculty senate or where the senate is a mixture of administrators and faculty, need a union to protect faculty rights. That's very common in state schools, where the senate does not have the power that a union can have. Either way it works, it just depends on the college.

S: Now, were you a part of the faculty union organizing at YSU?

F: No, it was organized in 70' or 71', and I didn't come until 76'.

S: So, when did you become involved in the union?

F: I didn't become actively involved with the union until about five years ago. I served as chair of the grievance committee, I served on the grievance committee and then I

served as chair, and then served as first vice-president when Bob Hope was president.

Then now, as president.

S: Could you tell me a little bit about your activities as chair of the grievance committee?

F: Oh, goodness! Well, I can tell you all kinds of horrible things, but it probably would not be appropriate! Actually, let me say this about the grievance committee: one conception of the union is that the sole purpose of the union is to negotiate a contract and the union doesn't do anything besides that. But, in fact, problems arise almost daily in matters that impact the agreement or questions about how it applies. When the administration and the association can't agree, end up in the grievance committee and, so, the grievance officer is very busy. Sometimes it's just a matter of talking to the administrators and talking to the faculty members and working out some solution to a problem, and other times it involves the filing of formal grievances. When I became grievance chair, there were, I think, 20 odd grievances in various stages. They had a new director of faculty relations who was much more receptive to discussion and negotiations, and we resolved almost all of those in a very, very short time. Increasingly, the pattern has been that we solve problems before we file grievances through negotiation, but there are still, occasionally, problems that do. I'm not the grievance chair anymore, but the grievance chair is still plenty busy.

S: When did you serve that position?

F: Oh, I don't have the dates at the tip of my finger. Let's see. I am president this year, I was first vice-president last year, so it must have been the year before that.

S: So, it's been within the last five or six years, like you said?

F: Yeah.

S: Okay. But, currently, you are the president. Could you describe that position for me?

F: It's actually very complicated. I meet weekly with the director of faculty relations to determine if there is anything we need to talk about, I brief the chief negotiator and the chair of the negotiating team and the grievance chair if anything comes up at that meeting, whenever there is a problem, I talk with the director of faculty relations. I go to lots of meetings. We have a standing executive committee meeting once a month and I preside over that. Right now, we're in negotiations and, as president, I serve on the negotiating team. I'm responsible for all the correspondence and representing the association to the NEA and OEA. That's at least a partial list.

S: It seems the union keeps you very busy, and my understanding is that these are all unpaid positions.

F: That is not entirely correct. That's what I thought, too, and I didn't find out otherwise until after I was president. But, YSU ^{OEA} ~~NEOA~~ does provide a small stipend for the president of, I think, \$2500 a year, but I put most of that back into student activities and union activities.

S: So, why would you say you're this active in the union?

F: You want the truth?

S: I do.

F: Okay. It is hard to get people to serve in the union, and I had been fairly actively involved in discussions with previous leaders of what was going on in our list serve and, when Bob Hope took over president from John Russo, Bob asked me if I would serve as first vice-president, and I said, "Well, since I've been mouthing of, I think I have an

obligation to,” and so I did. When Bob’s term ended, he persuaded me that it was my moral obligation to run for president, and nobody else would.

S: You got bullied into it!

F: No, I got persuaded.

S: Negotiations, the ones you’ve been involved in, have they gone smoothly?

F: I have not been involved in any negotiations until this year.

S: So, this will be the first year with the upcoming contract?

F: Yes.

S: Okay. You have not been involved in any strikes or anything?

F: You mean, in the entire history of my life, or here?

S: I mean here.

F: Well, there was a strike in 1980, I think it was around 1980, I can’t remember when the strike was. There was a strike when Neil Humphrey was president. It only lasted one day and, of course, I sat there on the picket line screaming at administrators trying to drive their fancy cars in. Actually, I remember strikes as a lot of fun when I was a kid because Douglas went on strike two or three times, and going down to strike headquarters to get a haircut or eat hot dogs or chili on the strike line, seemed like a kind of picnic to me.

S: So, you have fond memories of strikes.

F: I have fond memories of strikes. And, if we have a strike, I’m sure it will be wonderfully civil and a strike from which we can also have fond memories.

S: And eat hot dogs?

F: And eat hot dogs and chili. I think they also drank whiskey from pint bottles they kept in their pockets, but I don't have any first-hand information on that.

S: Why do you think there is a need for three separate unions on campus all involved with the OEA?

F: Okay, I think part of the answer to that is that a very large majority of unions in OEA are high school units. In high school, as well as here, there is a very clear demarcation between faculty and non-faculty, and our interests are, in fact, not identical. It would be very different to negotiate a single contract covering all of those positions, and that's in both elementary and secondary and college units. Why there is a difference between professional ^{ADAS} ~~APIS~~ and ACE, I don't know where that distinction comes from, and I don't know if they consider that important or not. But, first of all, the faculty are salary employees and not hourly employees; we don't punch time cards and our work loads are very complicated because they include personal research and most of us spend a great deal of time while we're at home gathering research and preparing for classes, so it's just an entirely different work structure than someone who's on an hourly wage or even somebody on a salary who's basically a nine to five employee.

S: You mentioned how most of the union units in OEA are mostly for elementary or secondary. How does higher education fit within that?

F: Okay. There is a part of NEA~~A~~, a subsidiary organization of it, that's called the Higher Education Action Counsel or Committee and it deals solely with higher education problems. We send representatives to that meeting, as well as to the National Education Association Representative Assembly. For our purposes, the work with HEAC is more important than the work with OEA or NEA representative assembly. In my experiences,

and I don't know if this has always been everyone's experience, but in my experience the OEA and NEA have bent over backwards to be of service if we would ask them for something. A recent example, you may be aware of Senate Bill 24, the student bill of rights, which is really a disguised attempt to introduce censorship in college curriculum. It's a bill that is not easy to read because it sounds as if it is preserving someone's rights in the beginning, whereas it is actually taking away rights. When I called the OEA general office they immediately responded and had already planned to announce their opposition to the bill and already ^{sent} ~~set~~ their representatives to lobby against the bill before that bill was sent to committee. So, they are sensitive to higher education needs, even though we are a very small minority of their group, we do get a fair treatment.

S: They do their best to accommodate you.

F: Yes, they do their best.

S: The other unions, ACE and the professional union: they formed later. Did you have involvement in that?

F: No, I had nothing to do with that.

S: When it comes to bargaining, do the unions act collectively or separately?

F: Both. It changes from bargaining year to bargaining year. This year, the negotiating team, the chief negotiator, and I have made a commitment on certain issues to keep the other unions fully informed. We're a little bit ahead on the calendar in negotiating, and we made it quite clear that there are some issues we will not negotiate separately from them. That doesn't mean a bind if we come down to some details in terms of the final contract. I've been trying to work very closely with the other unions, and I know the

W

^{GABRIEL}
chief negotiator Stan Lazalle has been, too, this year, so I anticipate a greater cooperation this year than there has been in the past.

S: What are some of those issues that you want to work together on?

F: I think I can't answer that question because we have a blackout on the details on negotiating information until we have a contract.

S: Fair enough. Could you discuss the current state of the faculty union?

F: Sure. One of the reasons that I was willing to take this over is because we are in a real transition stage. We're having a number of retirements this year and over the next two years. Most of the old farts like me will be gone and we really need to have younger people involved in the union. I don't mean young, but people in their 40s and 50s who came in the middle 80s and I worked very hard to try and involve faculty in the union process who have not been involved in the union before in the hopes that we will recreate interest in serving in the union leadership. As for the membership at large, they are happy to have us negotiate for them and do grievances for them but, quite frankly, most faculty are much more interested in their own research than in the details of the union. I consider my last year and a half a major recruitment effort. I don't know how successful it has been, and I won't know until the elections next month.

S: What do you consider to be the faculty union's greatest achievement for YSU employees?

F: I can't list just one. The union has certainly kept us, not at the highest salary level among universities, but has worked very hard to, and succeeded in a large part, in keep YSU at least in the middle of the range of Ohio State Colleges, excluding Ohio State. We have a remarkably good health care coverage, and the union it, I think in large part,

responsible in maintaining that. Some past achievements, I think we have some of the strongest intellectual property rights article in the country. So, those are some of the smaller achievements but, in general, at state universities, especially state universities in the middle range, administrators tend to bully faculty members. I think the union has done a remarkable job in preventing that.

S: Do you see administration and the faculty union working together, or is it more fighting and butting heads?

F: Well, it depends upon the administration and the administrators. The current administration has been pretty cooperative and has shown a real interest in resolving problems without going through a formal grievance processes. They have been open in terms of asking for input to things like position searches for senior academic administrators and things like that. There are administrators who I consider to be not cooperative with the union, and I don't think it would be appropriate for me to name them, as much as I might like to, and there are others that are quite cooperative. This administration compared to the previous administration: the Cochran administration started out cooperative but got increasingly less cooperative as time went on, so that by the end of the Cochran administration, the union and the administration were not really on speaking terms.

S: It goes in spells.

F: It goes in spells, and it depends very much on the people involved, and the people involved on both sides.

S: How is the faculty union protecting the YSU faculty today?

F: You mean this very day? You want to know what I did today? I would have to get into specifics to answer that, and maybe that's a good way to answer that. What I did today was to ensure that a faculty member on a temporary contract and whose contract will, in fact, be renewed was permitted to vote in a department chair election. Now, that may seem trivial, but if you multiply that kind of thing by 10 or 12 times a week, that's what we do. We have another question about how long the health care insurance extends into the summer for faculty whose contracts are not getting renewed. We had a discussion about that today. Again, that's something that's relatively small, and may seem as if why should we concern ourselves with people who aren't going to be here, but they're members of the bargaining unit and we want to serve their interests as long as we can. So, most of the stuff that I do, and I think the union does, is relatively small stuff like that, but 10 or 12 episodes like that take up a chunk of time.

S: But, you can't overlook that. That's the real important stuff, too. You have the large negotiations for the whole contract, but you have daily responsibilities to the members as well.

F: Yes.

S: Overall, how would you rate the success of the union?

F: Overall, I think it has been very successful and has been consistently successful over the years, although there has certainly been some ups and downs in terms of relationship of the union to administrators and members of the bargaining unit.

S: During your presidency, what would you like to accomplish for the union?

F: What I set out to do was to open up communication between the leadership and the membership, and I think I've been pretty successful in doing that. Another thing I've

been trying to do was to increase our activity with those organizations that which we are affiliated, that is OEA, NEA, and Higher Education Action Committee. I've been moderately successful in that. The third thing I wanted to do is improve relationships with the administration, and I think I've been very successful in doing that.

S: Especially since, you said, with the previous administration, the relationship was stressed.

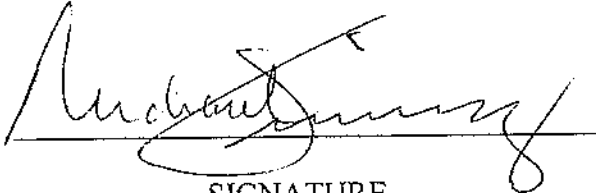
F: Well, it had reached a bad point.

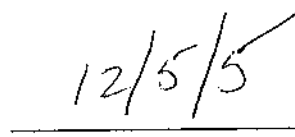
S: Well, that's the end of my questions, is there anything else you would like to add?

F: Can't think of anything.

S: Okay, well then, thank you very much for your time, and this concludes the interview.

I HAVE READ AND EDITED THE INTERVIEW AND, BY MY SIGNATURE,
INDICATE THAT IT IS APPROVED.


SIGNATURE


DATE