

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

OEA- Union History Project

O.H. 2228

Robert Forrey

Interviewed by

Heidi Scott

On

April 26, 2005

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INTERVIEWEE: Robert Forrey

INTERVIEWER: Heidi L. Scott

SUBJECT: OEA- Union History Project

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HS: This is an interview with Robert Forrey, interviewed by Heidi Scott for the Ohio Education Association Union History Project. It is being conducted at Shawnee State University on April 26, 2005 at approximately 10:15 in the morning.

HS: Good morning.

RF: Good morning.

HS: Well we are here today to discuss your involvement in the union at Shawnee State, but first I'd like to get a little bit of background information. So could you tell me where and when you were born?

RF: On Shakespeare's birthday, April 23rd, East Boston Massachusetts, in 1933.

HS: Could you tell me something about your childhood?

RF: I'm one of 14 children, so I came from a family of 16. Irish-Catholic on my father's side and Norwegian on my mother's side. My father grew up in East Boston on the waterfront. East Boston was largely an Italian City when I was born but there were still a few Irish like my family. And it was a rough, tough world. My father became a bootlegger and was arrested and did some time for that in the 1920s. We moved when I was five or six years old, to a suburb of Boston called Revere. Its north of Boston and it was the playground of New England. There was a beach there with an amusement boardwalk and a horse track and a dog track and lots of gambling. I grew up in Revere, and I was not a good student. The only thing I was interested in was athletics. I played basketball and football and I was expelled in my senior year of high school, partly by design because I wanted to continue one more year to play football. But I got expelled instead and went to a private school in New Hampshire when my life turned around. I discovered, for the first time in my life, that I could be a much better students than I was an athlete. So based on that one year, I was able to go on and get a B.A. and M.A. from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale. So that's some of the background.

HS: Very interesting.

RF: Yes, even I can see how unusual that all is.

HS: I'm still not past the 14 children. Ok, so you graduated from Yale with Ph.D. in American Studies. What prior work experience did you have before coming to Shawnee?

RF: I taught as a graduate student at Yale, and I began teaching in Hartford at the University of Hartford for a couple of years while I finished my Ph.D. Then I went to San Diego where I taught at San Diego State. At San Diego State I married a fellow graduate student at Yale and we went to Poland on a Fulbright in 1971. And that's where my only child, a son, was born in Poland

while I was there. My wife also taught in Poland that year. When I came back I was at San Diego for about a year and then I went to Yale in the early '70s to a think tank called the Institute for Social and Policy Studies. I was there to do research in American Studies and also I was the coordinator of a committee at Yale made up of academics from American colleges. The Bicentennial Committee on International Conferences of Americanists was the awkward name we had. I traveled around the world helping organize conferences on American Studies. These conferences were to commemorate the American bicentennial. I did that for several years, and then returned to San Diego. But then I took a job as chairman of the English Department in the New York system at Potsdam State University in northern New York. I wasn't there a year before I got very ill and a number of people were getting ill at that university. There was a mystery of what was happening to people. This was in the '70s when we were doing everything we could to ration fuel in the United States, including making buildings air-tight, and they did that up there. Unfortunately, they were using a lot of wax; they had these tile floors at the university and they were waxing and buffing these things all the time and that wax contained formaldehyde, as an anti-bacteriological agent. Slight amounts of it, enough to kill bacteria, made some people ill, and I was one of those who got very ill. I had to leave there for four and a half year I was out of work and unable to go into most public buildings. Back then, people like me were viewed with a little skepticism, you know, that this might have been psychosomatic and so forth, but subsequently, of course the sick building syndrome became a cliché. I was unemployed for four and a half years. Finally I did get back to work after I found some medication that solved my problem of going in to buildings, because my immunity had been weakened. The first thing I did was to go back to the high school to teach where I had been expelled and that was quite an experience. Revere is notorious as not only the playground, but also the crime capital of New England. Teaching at that high school was quite an experience. This would have been in the '80s, early 80s. I had been expelled from school in 1951; I didn't smoke or drink. I was just class clown but it got me expelled. When I saw this later generation of students, thirty years later, I realize how innocent I had been. I stayed there several years, and then I took this job at Shawnee State on this fateful move coming here.

HS: Now what year did you start here?

RF: I started in 1989.

HS: '89, so it actually was Shawnee State already.

RF: It was Shawnee State University and it had been since 1986.

HS: Now you were hired, I presume, as an instructor?

RF: I was hired as an associate professor.... I was promoted to full professor and I've taught here 15 years in the English Department.

HS: Ok now, moving on to the Shawnee Education Association (SEA). Why do you consider unions important in higher education?

RF: On the basis of my experience here, I would consider them not only useful but in public institutions, indispensable. I've tried to think of what this place would be like if there hadn't been a union and it's just inconceivable. I mean it's just hard to imagine what it would be like.

HS: Now, the SEA is associated with the OEA.

RF: Yes, it's an affiliate of the Ohio Education Association and the National Education Association.

HS: Now do you, and I realize you weren't here when they first organized and everything, but do you know why they chose to be part of the OEA?

RF: At one time, I tried to do research on the origin of the SEA. And I talked to a few people who were here back then, which would have been in 1971 or '72. And I don't recall getting a clear answer, you know, why was it the NEA or why was it the OEA? So I can't answer that. Let me say something about tracing origins. What I discovered was that there's almost nothing, in terms of documents, in connection with our founding and finding nothing here, I hoped that the OEA would have something. When I asked them about this, they said they did, but when we looked at it, they didn't have anything either. So I can imagine how orphans feel, not knowing their parents. Because that's the sense I had, you know. Where did we come from, how did it come about? It was frustrating. I found one newspaper photo of four people in that year, the year of the founding; and I've talked to those people about it. But its so many years later, their recollection is rather hazy.

HS: Do you, because I've done a couple other interviews already and I still haven't been able to pinpoint the year the union was formed, do you know?

RF: Well, that's part of the frustration because its either 1971 or '72. That's when they organized. Whether they were formally part of the OEA at that point, I don't know.

HS: Because that probably is a little bit too early, because Youngstown State was the first public university in Ohio to organize and they signed their first contract, I believe, in '72. I'd have to go back and double-check on that but I'm pretty sure theirs was '72. And then Tom Shipka from YSU, he went around I know, I know he did come down here and help other universities get organized.

RF: Yes, and I do recall his name from people talking about that early period, which would tend to confirm that YSU was first.

HS: From some of the other interviews I've done and heard, it was the mid-70s. A couple of years after YSU, I'd say maybe between '75, '75-'76. That's my educated guess from talking to

many people, but it's funny how we are here to do a project and no one can even pinpoint the year, you know, the exact time the contract was signed.

RF: There was a female instructor here who may have been instrumental in the founding, although there is some disagreement about that. There is one faculty member in particular, John Kelley, who thinks she was instrumental. I can't remember her name. But she was subsequently pressured out of here and went on.

HS: Mona Bias?

RF: Yes, Mona Bias. And she died in the last couple of years.

HS: OK, no, since the founding is still hazy, let's move on to you. You know, how long have you been active in the union?

RF: I don't know if I had been a member of the union at other places that I've been. If there was a union, I wasn't active in it. And when I first came here, my first year or two I tended to be reclusive. I was aware of the SEA but I was not part of it. But I gradually became not only part of it, but the leader of it, I mean: I served four terms as the president here. In my experience, though not as dramatic as others in terms of my transformation, my experience is instructive because one of the things that strikes me about this faculty is how conservative it is on a macro level, on a political level. I mean, most of these people would have come here as Republicans and a number of them as conservative Republicans. But after working here for several years, I can see this happening right now to a very conservative faculty member. When you work here several years, you gradually become politicized and radicalized. And if you have anti-union bias when you start, it's at least going to be lessened, if not eliminated completely because some of our most radical SEA members were very conservative, and to some extent, have never lost the conservatism on one level. It's on a level where they have a different sense of who they are politically.

HS: So, when you came here it took you a couple of years to become active, and then you said you served four terms as president, but have you held other positions?

RF: Yes, we have what's called an executive committee and that consists of the campus-wide offices for those, and we have the departmental and unit representatives, and I was one of those. I think that's how I started out, representing the English and Humanities unit.

HS: What years did you serve as president?

RF: I have something down here that might help me answer that. Our constitution limits the president to serving two consecutive terms. So I served in the late '90s, I served two terms then took off a year because if I had wanted to, I couldn't be a candidate again. After one year I returned and served two more years. Now, Steve Rader, who's currently president, is just completing his second year, so I think was president in the early 2000s and I had served two terms in the late '90s. I have a newsletter here in which I tell about the NEA president Bob Chase coming here, as he did, to a banquet we had. And that was rather unusual for a little Shawnee State to have the NEA president and I was SEA president then and as you can see that's 1998. So I was president in the late '90s for two years.

HS: Do the terms go like, August to August, or how does that run?

RF: No, the terms go from January to January.

HS: So then you definitely were [President] for all of that, I wasn't sure since they're school years how they run. So in '98 you were, so it's '98 probably '99, maybe?

RF: I think so.

HS: And then like 2001 and 2002?

RF: I think that might be it. Last year I asked people and I tried to get a list as complete as I could, of how has served as president in the last 15 or 20 years here. And if I find that I'll get it to you.

HS: Yes, that would be good, now that would be very helpful.

RF: I think Ed Minor might be the only other one who served as many as four terms here and he was very active in the early '90s.

HS: Now, could you tell me what were daily duties of the president?

RF: Well, the regular duties would have been to call and conduct meetings of the membership and also meetings of the executive committee. And the president is also called upon to review and approve contracts for new hires. One of the signatures on those documents would be that of the SEA president. The major part of the president's responsibilities are unscheduled and usually unexpected, any problems that arise on the campus that involve the faculty and the contract in some way.

HS: When you say the SEA president has to, you know, is one signature of many, I'm sure, to sign a new hire. Has there ever been an instance where everyone else thinks, "Yeah, this is a good candidate, we want to hire him or her," and then the president says "I don't think so."

RF: No, the SEA president would be out of line if he or she were to say that because all the president has authority over in the is new hire is whether this new hire is in conformity with the contract, particularly with the steps. What credit is this individual being given for the life experiences and other experiences that he or she might have? So the SEA president's authority is more narrowly focused. For example, the university, while it has historically done everything

it could to resist increasing the benefits or the wages of the faculty as a whole, when it comes to hiring it has a different philosophy and position. It has at times, fudged or even faked data on a new hire, and its usually at the expense of the existing faculty. So the SEA was put in the position sometimes of rejecting candidates, no their overall qualifications, but in terms of those narrow issues that I'm talking about. And what the administration would tell new hires is, "Well, you know, we're going to give you the best deal we can, but this union is going to do everything to stop us." So most new faculty who are hired come in with this notion that "This union is going to be working against me." So that's one of the problems that we had to deal with. It's to explain to new people.

HS: How that happens?

RF: How that happens and why it ultimately is to the faculty's benefit that we not let the administration make exceptions.

HS: So in other words, they have the person that they really want, so they make this package seem wonderful and the person comes in thinking, "OK, this is what I'm starting out, and every year I'll get a raise..."

RF: ...and that's squelched by the SEA.

HS: Now, is that still a problem? Do they do that?

RF: They were still doing it as recently as three or four years ago when I was president. Whether it's still taking place, I can't say.

HS: What position of all that you've held do you feel is most rewarding?

RF: In the SEA?

HS: Yes.

RF: Well, I have problems with that question, but to give you the simple answer, it would be as president.

HS: I guess I should have said, "Are any positions rewarding?"

RF: I have mixed feelings about my whole career here and my involvement with the union. I worked like hell after being expelled from high school. I mean I worked like hell to get my education and looked forward to a career as a college professor. But what I learned when I came to Shawnee State was that I could get away with this, they won't leave you alone here. I mean, they will do things that frustrate you and make you realize you have to get involved, and I got involved with a vengeance. But I got involved with mixed feelings because this is not my idea of what I would like to have done with the last stage of my career. Because this union thing is an all-consuming kind of thing and you don't have room for, or time or energy for, much else. So, in terms of being rewarding, I hesitate to look at it that way. I said earlier, there's no choice. I felt I had to do this, but I also did it with some resentment, frankly. This institution is so poorly run that I could not afford just to be a teacher and a scholar. I had to get involved politically. And that I'll always have misgivings about.

HS: One of my other interviewees, when I asked that question or something similar, she said, "Well you have unions because you need them." The SEA just didn't appear out of nowhere. It was formed because there was a need.

RF: Right, a past president, a university president with whom I was close, how was driven out of here because he was doing such an effective job, he said that, "If an institution has a union, it's because that institution failed in some important way and so it helped create the union."

HS: So you've devoted so much time to the union because you viewed it as a necessity? Is that fair to say?

RF: Absolutely.

HS: Now, moving on to the SEA as a body, how do you feel it fits with the OEA since the OEA is often thought of, you know, primarily a K through 12 organization.

RF: That's an uneasy relationship. I've been to several national conferences and I went up to Columbus any number of times, to conferences and so forth, and I know that in higher education this is sort of part of the frustration that some people have. The OEA is primarily a K through 12 organization. And we have to accept that and recognize the limitations that flow from that fact. At the same time, we also should acknowledge that it's a very powerful union because of K through 12. You know, it's very large, it's very feisty and it wouldn't be if it was just college professors. I'm afraid it would have a more laid-back or ivory tower kind of character.

HS: No, have you been involved in negotiations?

RF: Yes. I have been, I believe, on two negotiating teams.

HS: And will you describe that process for me?

RF: It usually gets started late, here, and I don't think they really become serious until you get very close to crunch time. Unfortunately, I think that's usually been the case. I had something to do with instituting interest-based bargaining. When James P. Chapman became president here, that would have been, I guess, the previous president left in 1998, so he would have come in in 1999 and he served three years. Anyway, while he was president, we did IBB, or Interest-Based Bargaining. It worked very well. I wrote an article on it for the OEA publication. And I

described the process and said it worked extremely well and that we owed a lot to President Chapman and his willingness to go along with it. I have thought of writing a follow-up to it because I still occasionally get queries from people around the country about that article. My point in that article was, SSU is an institution with a history of horrible relations between administration and trustees and the faculty and we seemed to have turned it around, fast. But unfortunately it was a mirage, because even as we were doing IBB negotiations, the trustees were planning to force him out. They took what they could from that situation in terms of an amicable negotiating period because those are rare here at Shawnee State. So they were willing to accept that but they weren't willing to accept this president who had helped bring it about. Events since then have only, frankly, confirmed me in my feeling that trustees and this arrangement that we have here is a terrible one. And I have a blog, incidentally called "River Vices," which I have been writing for about a year. And in the most recent blog, I have pointed out that for at least the last ten years, US News and World Report has ranked SSU very close to the bottom of the bottom of small liberal arts colleges. And we're the university that has been the beneficiary of millions of extra dollars because the godfather of SSU was Vern Rife, a very powerful politician here. But in spite of all those advantages, SSU continues to be ranked near the bottom and our reputation is part of the reason. Because what US News bases those on, in part, is how others perceive you, your reputation among your peer institutions. And we have a terrible reputation because we've had so many problems.

HS: Administratively, or I mean, with the professors, as in scholarly issues, or just a combination?

RF: The politics, it's the politics. This institution, I was thinking of this this morning for some reason, this institution was conceived in sin. And it has to do with the politics of Ohio and the politics of southern Ohio. Every state institution, I am sure, has to deal with the problem of political interference. But in our case, its scandalous the way politics rather than pedagogical issues determine what takes place here.

HS: Now, going back to the negotiations, just what are some of the most important issues that, you know, habitually come up on the negotiations table?

RF: The biggest issues is the allocation of available resources, how much of it is going to go to faculty and to faculty development? And people who know economics and the economics of this institution better than I do have said that, historically, this institution and administration fakes and fudges finances. For example, here's something called "cooking the books," by Gary Gemmer, a past president of the SEA, and he really watches the budget carefully. He points out how comparatively little is spent at Shawnee State on the academic side vis-à-vis other institutions and how much goes for administrative costs of one kind or another.

HS: Now, could you, and I know it varies department to department, but do you know what, say, an average salary is for faculty here?

RF: I knew those figures, but I couldn't, right now, tell you what those are. Let's say six to eight years ago, I know that in Ohio we were near the bottom in terms of salary.

HS: Have you been involved in any strikes?

RF: Yes, I came in '89 and the following year we were on strike.

HS: What was that over? Do you remember?

RF: No, I wasn't yet active in the union and I can't clearly remember the specific issues.

HS: Was it a long strike?

RF: My recollection is that it was a couple of weeks, but it was rather bitter, I mean, really. It was also, in spite of its negative effects, it was a tremendously bonding experience for the faculty. I

think the faculty got to know each other so fast. It would have taken years under normal circumstances to get to know people as well as you did when you are on the picket line.

HS: Now, it's my understanding that there are actually two unions at Shawnee State, one for the support staff and one for faculty. What is your knowledge, have you ever had any involvement, with the support staff? Do you know when they organized?

RF: No I don't. I do know that, at least the perception among SEA people is that, what usually happened here is the administration knew that we were the ones they would have to come to terms with. And we sort of set the standard or the level for the others, for the support staff. They were always supportive of us because they benefited from whatever we happened to gain. And I think that's right.

HS: When you came here in '89 was the support staff organized?

RF: I think so but I'm not positive.

HS: Does the support staff primarily have classified employees, those who need to take a civil service exam or is it professional ones as well?

RF: I'm not sure.

HS: Now could you tell me a little bit about the current state of SEA?

RF: It's a little hard for me to answer that. I had been so active but I stepped aside. Partly, not exclusively I should admit, but partly because I had been so involved, and I didn't want to appear to be trying to continue to direct things. I played a significant role in persuading our present president to run for president, that's Steve Rader.

HS: At least for those four years you were president, you were very involved. About how many hours a week would you say, you know, on average did you devote to SEA issues?

RF: The contract when I was president called for the president, the SEA president, to get release time, it was one class that year. And that's a fairly small percentage of my workload at the university, and I was always aware of how much, much more time I was putting in than that. And it was preparation, you know, class preparation was the area that you cut into quite a bit. To give you a figure of how much of my time was spent on union business, at least a third of my time. Yet I only got a 1/9 reduction in my classes. I may have said quarters. But if I said quarters, it's one, either it was one course or two course reduction over the four quarters. That was changed, it was one of things that we negotiated, we increased that slightly in the last contract, in terms of release time.

HS: If you could pinpoint, you know, one thing, what major role does the union fulfill?

RF: At this institution, it stands between the faculty and the trustees specifically. But the trustees represent the local elite here in southern Ohio. And the union stands between those two groups, protecting and representing and leading the faculty. And it also is there to try to improve the academic quality of the institution, I mean, contractually in every way that it can. It's, of course, limited in terms of its influence there, but it does have some, at least indirect, influence on academic quality at this institution. And that's a serious problem, as that US News' annual evaluation would suggest.

HS: And negotiations, I know this is jumping back a bit too, they occur every three years, right?

RF: Every three years, right.

HS: Is the administration aware, do they care that this institution is rated poorly?

RF: That's a question I've asked myself as well. I have raised it several times in the last ten years and when I do, somebody, even the faculty, resent my doing it. For one, perhaps legitimate reason, they say "What the hell are those evaluations worth anyway?" I'm sure they're not the best kind of evaluation that could be made, but they are the only one we have and they're better than nothing and they're published. However, what US News and World Report does is make it almost impossible for anybody to find out exactly where the bottom tier colleges stand. And they do that, I think, for two reasons. One is to protect themselves legally because when they rank somebody at the bottom, that institution might do something about it. And they also do it for public relations reasons. So they sort of protect themselves. I, however, paid a fee to get access to statistics and charts and so forth that are not otherwise available. But even then, it's difficult to determine exactly where an institution stands. However, on terms of reputation you can do it. And that's where I said we were ranked, very near the bottom of the fourth tier. I wonder about it, you know, what goes thorough the minds of the trustees when they see that. I think that this region has the capacity to compartmentalize stuff like that. I've seen trustees whom I've confronted, face-to-face, like we are here and I point something out to them and there is a blank look on their face. What does that look mean? Is it a very cynical look in which they're just appearing to be blank or is it something about the local consciousness that prevails in this institution where it just doesn't register? They have evolved to the point where it just doesn't, it's not going in there. Nothing's happening. There's nothing registering.

HS: I have another few set of questions then we're done, just kind of wrapping up questions. What do you consider the union's greatest achievement for its members?

RF: SEA's greatest achievement at this campus? That it has succeeded in preventing this institution from being as bad as it probably would if the local elite had complete control of this whole deal. Because this institution was viewed in this chronically economically depressed area, this institution was perceived as one of those publicly funded entities that could be milked. They have milked it, but nowhere near what they would have done if this union hadn't been here. So as bad as our reputation is, and I think we are better than our reputation, but it would

have been worse, significantly worse, if we didn't have this union. And there have been times when I feel that we've been blessed. And that's why I was so interested in finding out how it began, you know, it's like a miracle considering all the obstacles and the forces arrayed against it.

HS: How is the union protecting the faculty today?

RF: Well, in a number of ways. In particular, by working closely with the OEA and particularly with our labor representative, Jane Curry, who has done a great job over the past ten years. I mean, working with the OEA, we, on a daily basis, and also annually and every three years, in those negotiations, we make a very important difference in the lives of the faculty here. And I will point out something to you. We have a very high percentage of the faculty in the SEA, but there is a small percentage who is not. And some of them for very strong principled reasons. But even they, when they get in trouble, come to the SEA immediately. They have no hesitation to come to us because they know this is their only hope. In the case of one faculty member, he would have been long gone. Very conservative, very anti-union, but also a major headache to the institution. He would have been long gone if he didn't come to use more than once, in crises, and we unhesitatingly supported him.

HS: Overall, how would you rate the success of the SEA?

RF: Well, given the circumstances I described earlier, I would rate it very high. Its success rate is very high and I'm proud of it. There were times I used to think, "Is there a feistier union in this state than us?" I got a sense that Toledo union is really tough. And of course, Youngstown State is, really like our older sister and we look to it for guidance and a model. And they've got a proud tradition up there, but I don't think, and I may be prejudiced, I don't think there's a feistier union in this state than SEA.

HS: What do you hope the union will achieve in future negotiations?

RF: Rather than saying anything specific, you know, a specific goal, what I would like to see is this: it's always going to be a somewhat adversarial relationship, but I would like to see this chasm narrowed somewhat. And I thought we had back in President Chapman's time, only to realize his departure has made us even more cynical about this administration. I would like to see less of a gap, but I don't see that happening until this generation of people who are running things here in Portsmouth are retired and a new generation takes over.

HS: That is the last of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add?

RF: Only that I am so thankful that OEA and Youngstown State are doing this history because for several years I've talked about it. I've even made some steps to try to get a history of this place. Because I know what a feeling of loss it is that we don't even know who our parents were. So, all the more reason that I am thankful to get this stage recorded historically. And I'm afraid, with the best intentions, nothing might have come of my efforts, but no, what you're doing, I think this is going to make it much more likely that we will be able to document our history here.

HS: Well, thank you, that's our goal as well. Well, thank you and this concludes the interview.