

Walter Conway

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214 Clinton  
Muscatine, Iowa 52761

Interviewer: Paul Kelso

IOWA LABOR HISTORY ORAL PROJECT  
Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO  
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K: I'm talking to Walter Conway, and we're at 214 Clinton in Muscatine, February 1, 1979. Walter, how old are you again?

C: Seventy-three. I was born in 1905.

K: Roughly, can we go through a short list of your various accomplishments and put it on the front of the tape so folks will know. You were the Mayor at one time?

C: Well, my political career, I started out as an alderman. I had three terms as alderman and three terms as Mayor, one term in the House of Representatives, two and a half years on the Board of Control, Chairman of the Board of Control, State of Iowa. At one time I was the Democratic Chairman of this area on the fiscal side.

K: And then in the union movement what?

C: Well, in the union movement most of my work was done in the old Carpenters union. I helped start it. That is, I went down to see Jesse Reynolds and a man by the name of and and I walked down. In those days we didn't have a car. We went down to see Jesse Reynolds, an old union man, carpenter here. We brought the union people in here. They started organizing Huttig Manufacturing Company.

K: Huttig?

C: Huttig. It was a sash and door works. They started laying me off to one day a week, and I quit. That was the end of my union movement there. So I went to work for Railway Express. Of course, Railway Express had full union coverage. That is, they had the union shop. You had to belong to the union there to work

for Railway Express. I was a driver for them a while and agent for a while. I was also lobbyist for Railway Express.

K: Well, let's see if we can kind of begin at the beginning. We were telling some stories before we turned the tape on that I'd like to go over. I've been told that Muscatine is kind of a German community, that there were a great many Germans here. I know they used to have a German language newspaper in the old days. What is Conway? Irish?

C: Conway's Irish, but I went to a German school, a German Catholic school. Of course, all these people down here were German Lutheran. Many of them are down here. And I learned to admire them and I still do. The surprising thing was getting elected down in this area, because there were very few Catholic families. I don't believe there was five Catholic families down here. I always credit them with being the first people that were unprejudiced, the people of the south end. I think they were that much ahead of the rest of the town. I was surprised that I was elected, very surprised. I think I'm the only . . . I know I'm the only man that was ever elected down here from this ward for Mayor of Muscatine. In other words, there's some prejudice against the area. You know, it's the poor people's area.

K: We are in the south end of Muscatine, and it's sort of cut off from the rest of the town by what? By a bend in the river, you might say?

C: Well, mostly it's the area where the old button people worked, the button strikers and that, and they congregated down

here. Most of your factories are down here. A good portion of them are. The working people live down here. There's very few people of any wealth. In fact, I don't know of anybody of any real wealth that lives here.

K: You call this area Starvation Flat?

C: This was known for years as Starvation Flat. Well, right down the street here was what they called Peaceful Alley. People fight, especially when they're poor, when they're hard up, and they're just down with life, the way life is treating them, you know.

K: So this was kind of a rough end of town.

C: Oh, yeah.

K: It was the wrong side of the tracks, I guess.

C: At one time, if you was from uptown and you wanted to go with a girl down here, you couldn't do it. They'd just run you back uptown. That was it.

K: Well, you were born down in this end?

C: Oh, yes.

K: What did your father do?

C: Well, he worked for the railroad. He was what they called a baggage man. He worked there practically all his life. The interesting part of his life was his father died when he was twelve years old, and he went to work twelve hours a day, six days a week, driving teams down at the old lumber mill. He kept the family at twelve years old. That's the reason I've got a different opinion than most people on Aid to Dependent Children. He didn't

have a chance.

K: He went to work when he was twelve years old, right?

C: Twelve years old.

K: Do you recall ever hearing about an early Teamsters union? A horse and wagon union?

C: No.

K: In Dubuque and in Waterloo there were such under the old AFL, and they failed around 1920 during the big strike. I was just wondering if they had it here.

C: The first big union here, of course, was the Button Workers union. They controlled the town, that is, practically everybody worked either in the button factory or in the sash and door plant.

K: I understand from other sources that there were craft unions here. There was a Cigarmakers and Bricklayers and odds and ends of trade unions, or craft unions. When you say the first big union, are you referring to that organization attempt in 1911, when they had the big strike?

C: That's right. That's right.

K: We're just going to put this on tape right here. There was a very large strike in Muscatine in 1911 that went on for about a year. It had support from the Socialist Party, an exceptional amount of violence from various sources. Strikebreakers brought in from Chicago. There is a complete printed record of it in the Musser Library in downtown Muscatine, which I'm going to try to get copies of for the collection. You were only five, six,

seven years old then.

C: That's right.

K: But you say you recall some of the incidents somewhat.

C: I either recall or I've been told it so many times  
that I think I recall it.

K: Another five years and you will have been there, right!

C: Yeah, that's right.

K: But you say you recall the funeral procession for the  
policeman.

C: I'm sure I do.

K: What was his name?

C: Garrisher. I'm sure I recall that.

K: Briefly, what was that all about? This was not a very  
big town in those days.

C: Well, Garrisher was a policeman, and he was shot during  
the strike. He was a very tall man, and I suppose the reason I re-  
call it so well is because the casket stuck out the end of the  
hearse. I followed it from the Catholic High School, the German  
Catholic High School, out to Greenwood Cemetery. I watched the  
hearse take him into the cemetery.

K: So this entire end of town was involved pretty much  
in that strike.

C: Oh, this was the nucleus of the whole thing, right  
down here. Most of the people that worked in the factories were  
right here.

K: There were a number of factories in town that were in

the button business in those days?

C: Well, they had what they called little plants where the men cut the buttons, and then they had the big ones where they'd finish them. Right in this area where we are now there was a button factory, a small one. There was probably twenty men within a half block of here. And then there was another one of maybe fifty men cutting buttons. They'd cut them in one place, and then they would finish them in another. But they were scattered all over, even in some of the small towns around here they had button cutting factories. That's where these people lived, see. Their wives worked in the factories sorting buttons and finishing them, and all the kids and their husbands. Everybody worked just to make a bare living.

K: I understand that the strike was caused primarily because of the system of payment. They paid the people by weight rather than by count. The workers accused the factory of cheating them on wages.

C: Well, what they did, it was really a count, but a gross then wasn't like a gross in really the numbers it should be. They charged them so many gross, but it would be more than the gross, and then they would throw out anything that had a little indentation on it or something. They said it wasn't cut just right. They had so many ways of screwing the workers. They would take their count away from them, or their wages. Some of them . . . There was so much hatred brewed over that, because these people that were weighing the buttons out for the workers were there for

one reason only, and that was to screw the workers out of what they had coming to them.

K: This is like the weight man on the scale at the coal mine who had his thumb on the scale.

C: Absolutely. They didn't even admit what a gross would be in buttons. A button gross is much more. I forget just what the number was.

K: I see. Now, once again, your father was in what business?

C: He was with the railroad, Rock Island Railroad.

K: Rock Island. Okay. Was he a union man?

C: I don't know.

K: You don't know.

C: I don't think so. I don't think they had unions then. I'm not sure. I'm sure he would have joined if he had the opportunity, but I don't remember.

K: How far did you get in school, Walter?

C: I went one year to college.

K: One year of college.

C: I was going to school when the Depression hit. Then I came home.

K: I see. Where were you?

C: St. Ambrose.

K: You had not had any particular work experience up until then?

C: Oh, yeah. I'd worked for five years before I went to