## **LaSalle Trades and Labor Council**

an Oral History

James Housby, Interviewee Of LaSalle, Illinois

Interview Date: July 26, 1975

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Tape Number: 1

Date of Interview: JULY 26, 1975

Place of Interview: LASALLE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Interviewer's Name: FLORENCE CLARKE

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Q: This morning at the LaSalle Public Library we are interviewing Mr. Jim Housby. My name is Florence Clarke. Mr. Housby has long been a student of local history and has been especially interested in the local labor movement. Mr. Housby could you tell us something about the history of this movement?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. The history of the LaSalle Trades and Labor Council dates back to March 1902. Listed are the charter members appearing on the charter of the Trades and Labor Council when it was organized in March of 1902: Andrew McLaughlin, Arthur J. Buell, F. E. Hicks, J. H. Noonan, J. P. Donnelly, D. S. Dougherty, George Hunter, and William J. Brennan. The first meeting place for the Trades and Labor Council was located in the Luke O'Connor building, 845 First Street. About 1910, the Trades and Labor Council relocated their meeting quarters in the McLane Building, 726 First Street. Practically all labor union organizations held their meetings on the second floor of the same building for the past 66 years. The Labor Temple has been headquarters for practically all crafts and labor unions in LaSalle. During the early days of the American labor movement, it was a traditional custom and a definite mode of transportation for delegates of the various unions to travel by side-door Pullman-boxcars--when attending the annual conventions of their respective union organizations. The late George Hunter, Sr. attended several miner conventions by traveling the side-door Pullman style, hundreds of miles. This included a ten dollar bill for full coverage expenses, a package deal. For two traveling delegates imagine the whistle

A: stop homecoming. Succeeding chapters of the labor history including the American labor movement will appear in succeeding issues of the Labor News. The labor history of the memories of some of the early founders and members of organized labor dating back to the 1880's. Some of the pioneer members were residents of the Tri-City area as told from their viwid memories from the past and written by Jim Housby, yours truly. Many of the local pioneer labor leaders played a colorful role in our country's great labor movement, which was outstanding and they were forerunners to the American standard of living of today. They can, these old time labor leaders, can recall the trials and tribulations experienced during the pioneering periods of the American labor movement dating as far back as 106 years ago. When workers joined local unions during the pioneering period of the American labor movement their affiliations with organized labor could not be revealed openly except to brother unionists. Undercover signs were used as a secret code to convey places of union meetings in fear of being purged and subject to dismissal from their employment in reprisal against joining unions and organizations into the American labor movement. They recall when many railroads, factories, mines, construction contractors, and business enterprises strictly prohibited their employees to become members of the organized labor movement. Many of our local pionees labor leaders and members entered the coal mines at the age of ten. The age limit permitting boys to perform trapping jobs in the coal mines was ten and eleven years. The late George A. Hunter, a local pioneer labor leader recalled an incident during a cola mine strike many years ago when Billy Taylor, the shertff of LaSalle County, utilized two cases of pick handles in equippping the deputies at the Union Mine

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A: shaft. The cigar makers, carpenters, miners, and laborers were the first unions to organize into the great American labor movement. The prevailing scales for laborers in 1895 was 15¢ per hour in the warm weather, equivalent to \$1.50 for ten hours work and reduced to 12¢ per hour commencing the day after New Year's, equivalent to \$1.20 for ten hours work.

Q: Very interesting, Mr. Housby. Now let's talk a minute about national labor leaders, Samuel Gompers, Eugene Debbs, John Mitchell, Mother Jones, and Peter McQuire. It might be interesting to know, did any of these leaders ever visit LaSalle?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke--Mitchell, John Mitchell, one of the first presidents of the United Mine Workers was a resident of our area. He hailed from the city of Spring Valley. And we had the historical events of Mother Jones who visited this area on several occasions and one notably, back in 1892 when she--during a mine strike she led women on a march from LaSalle to Granville. Now I will give you the history of Mother Jones. Mary Harris Jones, known and loved by her people which she represented as Mother Jones. She was born May 1, 1830 and she passed away on November 30, 1930. Born in Cork, Ireland, immigrated to America in 1835, her father was a railroad construction laborer. She attended Toronto, Canada high and normal schools, taught in a convent in Monroe, Michigan and Memphis, Tennessee. She was married in 1861, her husband was a member of the Iron Molders Union. They had four children, the husband and the four children died in a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1871 all her possessions were swept away by the historical Chicago Fire. In the confusion following she began attending meetings of the newly organized Knights of Labor. Mother Jones devoted her life

A: in the struggle for improved labor conditions and developed a talent for vigorous and moving speech, characterized by picturesque vocabulary, a sharp ready wit and a strong sense of drama. Mother Jones appeared wherever labot strikes were acute, a little old lady in a black bonnet with a high falsatto voice and a handsome face framed in curly white hair and lighted by shrewed kindly grey eyes which could splash defimance from behind their spectacles at a capitalist, company guards and militia alike. Mother Jones' word was regent with the coal miners, more effective than the state militia during the coal mining strikes of 1891 and 1892. As an organizer of the United Mine Workers, she attracted national attention by organizing marches of the wives of striking coal miners armed with mops and brooms. It was on this memorable occasion that the historical march was made between LaSalle and Toluca, Illinois by striking miners of the LaSalle community led by Mother Jones. In 1903 Mother Jones was sent to Colorado by the United Mine Workers and while posing as an itinerant peddlar secured information which led to a strike in the Colorado coal fields. Mother Jones was the pioneer advocate of child labor laws of today. She learned at first hand the labor and living conditions of the coal miners. At the age of 93 she was still working among coal miners in the West Virginia coal fields, making vigorous speeches. On her 100th birthday anniversary she made a speech and posed for motion picture cameramen. Six months later she died of old age, she was buried in the United Mine Workers Cemetery at Mount Olive, Illinois, following a requiem Mass in Washington, D. C. Mother Jones always preserved a sense of humor and a tolerance of sympathy even for her adversaries which made her beloved by thousands of working men and women. Mother Jones was blessed with instinctive

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A: traits of her native dignity. Mother Jones was a pioneer trailblazer for women in liberation movements.

- Q: She indeed was a colorful character, Jim, wasn't she?
- A: Yes she was.
- Q: Oh yes, now. . .
- A: One of the outstanding labor leaders up to now and a little over. . .
- Q: Now we've heard a great deal about John Mitchell who was a national leader but is associated I think with Spring Valley, could you tell us a little bit about John Mitchell?
- A: Yes, Miss Clarke. John Mitchell was an outstanding American labor leader. He seeved as presidnet of the United Mine Workers from 1898 to 1908. In 1902 he organized and successfully directed the anthracite coal mine strike in Pennsylvania. In 1885 he joined the Knights of Labor. But in the strike of 1888 which lasted one year and resulted in a twenty percent wage decrease—from this experience Mitchell learned the need for a separate miner's union. During the strike of 1888 he resided in Spring Valley, Illinois. Later in 1890 pressure from below brought the Kights and trade unions together in this industry—to be born, the United Mine Workers of America. Mitchell joined the local branch on June 1, 1891. From 1915 until his death John Mitchell was head of the New York State Industrial Commission.
- Q: It's very interesting. You know, I'm wondering about some of the local men who contributed to organized labor. I've heard of the names of George Hunter, Pearl Davis and Charles Bennett. Could you tell us something about those early labor leaders? I think George Hunter's name is well known in county history.
- A: Yes, Miss Clarke. George Hunter was born May 13, 1876 in Westmoreland

A: County, Pennsylvania where his parents had moved prior to his birth from the Tri-City community. George married Cora Martyn. They are the parents of ten children. They reside at Plety Hill. He was a pioneer labor leader and the only living charter member at the time when the celebration and the celebration dinner was held at Hotel Kaskaskia in LaSalle in April 1956. Mr. Hunter served as secretary of the council for many years. Geoirge recalled the many struggles organized labor had during the pioneering period of the American labor movement. He started to work in the coal mines at the age of 15. When he was a boy the age limit for permitting boys to perform trapping jobs in the coal mine was ten and eleven. He recalled an incident during a coal mine strike many years ago when Billy Taylor, the sheriff of LaSalle County, utilized two cases of pick handles in equipping the deputies at the Union Mine shaft. George had a colorful political career based upon an outstanding record of courtesy and efficiency in the capacity of serving as LaSalle County Clerk for nineteen years and a member of the Oglesby School Board for 53 years.

Q: Oh, that name is very familiar in Oglesby. I think another Oglesby name was Charles Bennett.

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. Charles Bennett was an outstanding labor leader from a local to a national level. Charles Bennett, the dean, who served during the many years in all office and committee capacities in the Trades and Labor Council. He was born on June 29, 1868 at Council Hills, Illinois. He married Ann Williams and they have one daughter, Mrs. William J. Warnock, with whom Mr. & Mrs. Bennett had resided for many years. Charles Bennett who served as secretary-emeritus of the LaSalle Trades and Labor Council was a career unionist and leader for over 65 years. Mr. Bennett was a coal miner by occupation, he

A: entered the coal mines at the age of fourteen. He was a delegate to the Trades and Labor Council for 50 years, serving as president and held various other office in the Trades and Labor Council. Mr. Bennett was instrumental in organizing the local milk driver's union and for many years he was an outstanding recorder for promoting the principles of organized labor down through the years. Mr. Bennett served as assistant supervisor of LaSalle Tonwship for twelve years, a very colorful career.

Q: And he contributed so much to labor in the community. There is another name that I've heard all of my life and that is Pearl Davis. A: Yes, Miss Clarke. Mr. Davis was another outstanding labor leader. Pearl Davis was born May 18, 1875 in York, Nebraska. He was a career railroader, starting at the age of eighteen during the most dangerous era of railroad history. In the pioneering period of railroading the old link and pin coupling, sused to hook up cars, was hazardouş, requiring switchmen and brakemen to run in between moving cars to couple and uncouple them. Thousands of railway workers were injured or killed annually. The Janney coupler was invented making railroad work much safer. Mr. Davis recalled working on the railroad during the American Railway Union strike in 1894. The 1890's were called boomer days, traveling from one job to another was the fad. He worked different railroads until coming to LaSalle in 1898. Mr. Davis claimed to have beersa boomer, in fact no one would ever dispute Mr. Davis' word on his splendid record. He worked as a switchman on the Rock Island Railroad for over 40 years until his retirement. Mr. Davis was a delegate to the Trades and Labor Council for over 40 years, holding various offices in the Trades Council. He served as an alderman in

A: the Second Ward of LaSalle, also served as a member of the LaSalle City Council for six years, recently served as assistant supervisor from LaSalle Township.

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Q: Coal mining was an important early industry in the Tri-City community. At one time there were eleven coal mines in operation in the three cities. And the presence of limestone was the basis of our present cement industry. What use was made of limestone in LaSalle years ago, Jim?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. Very interesting as a forerunner of lime kilns, in the 1880's and 1890's Mr. Grimshaw owned and operated a lime kiln located on the west side of the Rockville Road curve. In later years his son, William Grimshaw, operated the lime kiln. Rock was crushed and burned which was processed into which was used for mortar. Lime was important in rock, stone, brick, and chimney construction.

The lime kiln was in operation prior to the manufacture of cement at the German-American Cement Plant. The lime kiln was located on property which was quarried out by the Alpha Cement Company. Mr. Grimshaw marketed his limestone product to lumber yards and contractors in the area.

Q: Did you know that Ferrence Cullen, grandfather of Mrs. Mary Moran, also had a lime kiln east of LaSalle, about 1850. The kilns were built into the sides of the hill with alternate layers of coal and limestone. The resulting product—lime—was used to plaster and it was mixed with sand and made, as you pointed out, mortar. Did you know that the limestone blocks out of which St. Patrick's Church is built were put together with this mortar. Early industries are very interesting, I heard at one time the Eliel family had a brewery, could you tell us about akkat?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. The Eliel Brewery was situated in the eastern part of the city of LaSalle, in the valley of the Little Vermillion Creek. It was called the LaSalle Brewery Company. It was located in the immediate area of the cement silos which has become the property of the Illinois Cement Company, formerly the Alpha Cement Manufacturing Company. The business was begun about 1855 by the Eliel brothers, and was continued a part of the time with other partners until 1879 when a stock company was formed with the following members: Louis Eliel, Jeremich Eliel and Adolph Wertheim, of which company Mr. Eliel was president, J. Eliel vice-president, and Mr. Wertheim secretary and treasurer. At first the business was conducted on a small scale but in 1868 a large stone building was erected, with the capa city of turning out from 25,000 to 30,000 barrels per year. The business went into the hands of receivers in the spring of 1884 and was operated by them about three months when the trustees took charge of it. The trustees were A. J. O'Conor, E. F. Bull of Ottawa and C. W. Holzeimer of Chicago. About twenty men were employed. Malt beer and pilsner beer were manufactured. The appurtenances were as good as any breweries of the era. Jay Walter of Chicago was the foreman. Connected with the brewery was a bottling establishment. Mr. Eliel's son Oscar served as an apprentice brewmaster and later became the brewmaster. The brewery consisted of four stone buildings, the large building had a wooden platform the length of the building. The beer was consumed locally, saloons in the area purchased the beer in barrels, kegs, or ponies, which were small kegs. Customers would purchase beer direct from the brewery with horse drawn wagons and buggies. Local redidents, John Stuart and Joe Segaert, recollect the brewery operations.

A: Joe Segaert remembers going to the brewery with his father and buying a pony of beer for about 90¢. All beer was draught, dispensed from wooden barrels or kegs. There was no bottle beer there in those days. In that day and age beer was made from pure ingredients, including pure malt and hops. During the early days of brewing beer artificial essences were unknown to the brewing art. The LaSalle Brewing Company stored its beer in wooden barrels or kegs and ponies in four tunnels which were dug in the hillside along the brewery.

Q: Jim, as part of its Bi-Centennial observance, LaSalle is planning to restore Pulaski Park to it's so called glory days. Do you know something about the history of this little park?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. Bi-Centennial plans may restore Pulaski Park to glory days. Legend has it that LaSalle's Pulaski Park was originally set aside as the site for a LaSalle County courthouse. A plan that went astray when the majority of the practicing attorneys in LaSalle County caused the courthouse site to be changed to Ottawa. There have been many other changes in the history of the little park, including its name. It has been known as City Park, Peoples Park and Fifth Street Park. In 1929 it was officially dedicated as Pulaski Park in honor of Casimir Pulaski hero of the Polish anit-Russian insurrectionists of 1768 and of the American Revolution. Now it is the center of attention on the 200th anniversary of that revolution. LaSalle Bi-Centennial Committee has made its renovation a prime Bi-Centennial project. A bandstand was located in the center of the park. It was typical of the bandstands in the parks of practically all progressive communities of the early 1890's. It was a wooden structure with a spiral wood shingle roof,

A: with a metal ornamental spire at the peak. The bandstand was about twenty feet square and there were about eight wooden steps to the south entrance with a bannister on each side. A series of square balusters supported the railing around the bandstand. It was painted dark green. The ground level of the bandstand was used as a utility room for storing park maintenance tools including a man powered lawn mower. The entrance to the utility room was on the north side. Frank Heathcote was the park custodian prior to the razing of the bandstand. In front of the bandstand was a walk area including stationary benches, and a round concrete drinking fountain with five spouts. South of the benches was a concrete oval shaped pool containing about eighteen inches of water. It was enjoyed by children in bathing suits and with fish poles. Many small fish such as carp and bullheads were stocked in the pool from the canal or lake. In the northwest corner of the park was another pool known as the crawdaddy pond. It was in a natural setting including four huge boulders making it a children's EXECUTED THE park lights were atop dark green ornamental standards with globes at the ends of four cross arms and one center top globe. The standards were the same style as those used in the downtown business district prior to a modernization program in 1931. Oldtimers associate the parkwith music since concerts were popular prior to the eras of radio and television. Many musicians and organized bands of that era performed in the park's bandstand. Notable among them was Angelo Fonteccio, professor of music and bandmaster of the Spring Valley band. Ralph Schmoeger of LaSalle recalls many of them: Joe Gmeiner, Professor Atwater, and Fred Brewer, John Baluta, an accomplished violinist whose repertory included polka and other Polish folk music. Anton Pagani who took his

A: muscial organization on concert tours across the country. Also popular entertainers in Pulaski Park was the Twin City Band, the German Band of 1910 to 1918 and the Austrian Band from 1912 to 1920. And I am also happy to state that one of the last performances of any musical entertainers was the last Father Flannagan from Boys Town who played at the park on or about 1922.

Q: I didn't know that. Let's hope that the restoration of this park will bring as much joy to this generation as it did to our generation.

Jim, one of the first pieces of highway construction I think was in LaSalle, what we call the Old Bottom Road. I think that history should be very interesting.

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. The Old Bottom Road was one of the first sections of concrete established as state highway in our state. The LaSalle-Oglesby concrete highway which it is known as today, is a successor to the Old Bottom Road, a wonderful transformation from dust, mud, and ruts to a permanent smooth clean highway. The old road because of the immense amount of traffic which it carried daily was always in in bad condition. Itss surface was not rigid enough to withstand the jar of heavily laden wagons and occasional floods washed and rutted its surface. Its maintenance was a heavy burden on the town, the upkeep averaging over \$700 annually during the past ten years. The new road is better suited to all forms of traffic, gives better service, and its upkeep is practically negligible. The assistance rendered possible from the state and county under the movement for improved roads brought about an attempt to provide a permanent highway to take the place of the burdensome makeshift of the past. Once the plan

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A: was initiated, the spirit of cooperation which manifested itself made the problem wasy and was accomplished. The Marquette Cement Manufacturing Company and the Chicago Portland Cement Company offered to supply free of cost sufficient cement for a twenty foot highway and to defray the freight and dray charges of the sand and gravel, which were denated by a number of sand and gravel companies affiliated with the National Sand and Gravel Producers Association. The latter contributions were secured at the instance of Mr. Frank Fenwick, president of the Joliet Sand and Gravel Company and Mr. P. M. Lewis, secretary and treasurer of the American Sand and Gravel Company. These donations when offered to the board of township highway commissioners were promptly accepted, the commission agreeing to defray the seeks necessary labor costs. The highway was constructed under the direction and supervision of the Illinois State Highway Department. When the work of construction was well advanced Honorable F. W. Matthiessen, actuated by his usual high regard for public safety, presented to the township a concrete rail fence, at once substantial and artistic. The Citizens Lighting Company then generously offered the use of its concrete transmission line poles for the installation of a lighting system and agreed to furnish free of charge the lamps and globes and current for illuminating purposes for one year. The illumination of the highway was only a forerunner of a new era of night travel in the country. As depicted by the subject of this, LaSalle County boasts second to none in the United States. The passage of constructive road leglislation during the 1913 session of the Illinois Legislature providing state aid for every county in Illinois makes it possible for the example set by LaSalle Township to be followed throughout the state. Every community is not blessed with such a generous contingent

A: of progressive concerns and individuals who worked together, have lent so much loyal assistance to the completion of the highway project. But it is to be hoped that the rapidly growing sentiment for good roads will soon crystalliza into action in other localities. Miss Clarke, history has many outstanding features of that construction which took place on or about 1916. Following the completion of the Old Bottom Road being resurfaced, and becoming part of the nation's first concrete highway system, the LaSalle Fire Department had an old fire engine which was used for many years for fire purposes which all cities had during that era, and it fortunately, this occasion occurred during the Corn Festival time which today Mendota is the corn capital. Well, LaSalle during the 1916 celebration of the road had a corn festival and the corn was put into troughs and the steam from the old fire engine was utilized to boil the corn and it can be recalled, and I think Miss Clarke you can also state this--that an outstanding businessman and one of the outstanding butchers of his day. Con Dwyer. . .

O: Yes, I remember him.

A: ...well, Con Dwyer donated a beef and the beef was roasted one a spit.\* During that period of time--and there were--and during the establishment of the cooks--was the late Dr. H. M. Orr and Mattie Bungart, another natural born chef. They took charge of the food concession and the highlight was--also during the hilarity and the refreshments--the beef got a little much cooked on one side, perhaps we'd term it burnt today, but it was all relished and it was delicious and is part of our history today. Now I know Miss Clarke, that you have very many interesting points to bring up as you,

A: during your day, you can recall with your folks being present during that occasion.

Q: Yes indeed I remember—that a celebration we had—and each Sunday we used to walk over that Bottom Road. Of course it has been replaced now with a very modern highway. Speaking of transportation, Jim, brings back the memory of the old horse transportation. Did LaSalle have many horse troughs?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. I, plus the support of good memories and people that have lived in our community and recollection of my memory, I recall that there were several troughs located throughout the city. We will take one which was on the southwest corner of Second and Joliet Street which now is the--stands there is the Hummer Building and to the west of the Hummer Building was a lumber yard and this trough was-had a spigot. The spigot was just plain, it had a valve and the valve at the bottom of the trough, and the water continuously run 24 hours around the clock. Horses were watered there, people drank there--it was rather a large trough. And I recall there was one up on the northwest corner of Fifth and Crosat Street, adjacent to Pulaski Park. There was one up on Ninth and Crosat Street and there was one on the northwest corner of First and Laharpe Street, also on the northwest corner of First and Union Street--was during the operation of the LaSalle Coal Mine--all the coal was conveyed around town and the immediate vicinity by horse drawn vehicles and that was a standard water trough and they must--they had them in various sections of the city because after all, horses had heavy workto do and water was an essential factor.

Q: Now we're talking about water, just what were these fire wells we read about in early history?

A: Well Miss Clarke, these fire wells to me is all history. But I've been told by some of our oldtimers there was one located on the southeast corner of Fifth and Marquette Street and I've been told there was one over on, adjacent to Pulaski Park, in that area, at Fifth and Crosat Street. Now the purpose of these fire wells was, well what we would call, it was pre-history-before we had the conveyance of our city water system through our water mains. In case of fire in them days they had a fire engine that was--they used wood and coal--after they got going they would feed the boiler with coal and it served as--these fire engines were pumps and they had a connection, appurtenance for pumps, and they pumped water through hoses to close as they could get. Sometimes if the distance was over the length of the hose, naturally became the bucket brigade.

Q: Oh yes, it was a colorful era in fire fighting, wans't it? Now someone told me recently that we had in the early days a balloon ascension, where a woman lost her life. Were you ever told anything about that?

A: Yes, Miss Clarke. I recall hearing that and going back when I was about six or seven years old. But this happened, to establish a period of time when ascension—that ill-fated ascension took place, we will say was around 1906. I talked to Mr. Joe Segaert, a native of our community and an outstanding historian, and he witnessed the ascension. When this lady—she was an outstanding balloonist—there was a change of the current of the wind and she kind of hesitated about going up. But like things happen, the crowd assembles and they want action, and sometimes action—ill-fated. In this particular case, it was ill-fated. The balloon—she ascended and the currents took her off her course.

A: And the patrol wagon them days was always utilized to retrieve the balloonist. Evidently and unfortunately the balloon, the balloonist landed in the Illinois River and her body was recovered the following day, Miss Clarke.

Q: How tragic. Well this has been a very interesting session, Jim, thank you very much.

A: And thank you, Miss Clarke.

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