

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

SOUTHERN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Carolina Piedmont Project

Interview

with

GARY JOSEPH ALLEN, JR.

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Badin, North Carolina

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Transcribed by Jean Houston

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ROSEMARIE HESTER: You had come down to work at Badin, and the wages were not satisfactory to you.

CARY J. ALLEN, JR.: They were thirty-six cents an hour, and we figured that was pretty low. In 1936 the Depression was gradually getting over with. Very few cars in the parking lot; few people could afford cars then. So we decided to investigate the possibility of a union and found that they had an A F of L union in town. But it was very ineffectual; it didn't have but about seven members. So we decided we could do something about it. That process started, and over the long haul we managed to build what we have today, get pensions and our medical care and all the fringe benefits that we have today. But it was a long process, a little bit at a time.

RH: What did you find the AF of L union was like in '36 when you first investigated it?

ALLEN: Like I say, it only had seven members, and it was very ineffectual. It didn't speak for the people in the plant. Then we had an invitation to come to New Kensington, that they were going to go over the Steel Workers Organizing Committee of the CIO, which was the Committee for Industrial Organization--they called it a Congress of Industrial Organization later--under Philip Murray. So we got up to Pittsburgh--New Kensington is just outside of Pittsburgh, and met the head of the AF of L and asked him if we organized a. . . . Did something with the AF of L in Badin, what would be the end result? He said, "Well, the machinists' mates will have to go to Salisbury," where they had railroad shops, see, "and the electricians'll probably have to attend meetings in Charlotte." And we told him that that would completely undo all we had done to unify the plant as one bargaining force.

[Interruption]

ALLEN: Our local union picked three of us to see what New Kensington

intended to do, so we borrowed Dean's car, three of us, and went and drove the thing there, and it broke down in the middle of the night. We set there all night in West Virginia with it pretty cold. I didn't know how cold; I knew I froze. I knocked on a guy's door to ask for a drink of water. I went out to get the dipper out of the bucket, and the bucket and all came up, because there was ice all over the place. [Laughter] But we finally got there and met with the head of the Aluminum Council, a fellow Worth Williams(?), and he was nice to us. Told us not to go over there; they were a gang of communists over there in New Kensington, to stay with the AF of L. But we were permitted to go over to New Kensington with this provision: that we were fraternal delegates and had no right to vote on anything that they brought up over there. But they insisted that we vote right on, although we weren't authorized to. And wrote up a constitution, elected a head of the Aluminum Workers of America, which was an international. They intended later on to take in Canada, and they got the thing set up. One thing that I was primarily interested in in setting up an international was the autonomy of the local unions. We didn't want to submerge all our activities under the restrictive head of the international. [Laughter] We wanted to keep as much local autonomy as possible. And that was my objective all the way through, writing the constitution, to give every local the right to run pretty much as it wanted to, and I think we did a good job on the constitution. Then we came back, and though the union was small--at the time, we hadn't made much progress in signing up members--we had to sell the idea of switching over to the local union, and it wasn't too much trouble. Because they could see the advantages of being in one bargaining unit; whereas when the union was divided up into activities, then the company could play the machinists off against the electricians and so on, and . So we agreed to switch over

to the CIO. And I read or knew the AF of L had impounded \$29,000 of New Kensington's money [laughter], because they were pulling out. And on the floor over there at New Kensington, they called it. . . . This guy that met us up there, Williams, the head of the Aluminum Council, they were kind of, you know what you could think of [laughter]. And so we came down. We also had to handle grievance cases in Pittsburgh. We came down from a grievance case, and he bought a newspaper. And it was on the front page of the newspaper all they'd called him over there, and we'd had a part in it. [Laughter] He started to unroll it, and we talked to him right fast, and he'd roll it back up and he'd unroll it again. We got away before he read what everybody over there had called him. But while we were there handling the grievance case, the president of Alcoa in Tennessee was there, and he said to the executive vice-president of Alcoa, "What are you going to do about our demands in Alcoa at Maryville?" And he said, "You've had my last word." He said, "Well, I have to go home and call a strike." And he said, "Well, you've had my last word on it." We all had met there together once. So after we came down, I said, "Don't go home and call a strike. Come on and join in with New Kensington and Badin, and you won't have to call a strike, in all probability." "No, I'm going home and call a strike," which he did. So we went over to visit him.

RH: Who called the strike?

ALLEN: Their big plant president out at Maryville, Tennessee. They have a huge plant out there. They had a big AF of L local out there. So we walked around; they had pickets on the gates. The president of the local told one of the pickets to call off his pickets, that the plant manager had promised not to run in any strike-breakers. He said, "Is that an order?" He said, "Yes, it's an order." He said, "All right, I'll obey the order, but I don't think much of it. I think they will try to run in strike-breakers."

Which it tried to do. They brought a gang of guys in from Chicago or somewhere in a truck, and fifteen people were killed in the outcome. I asked the guy later how it came out. He said, well, after, the AF of L arbitrarily told them to go back to work the best way they could, and left the union on a limb and ruined the strike. I asked what happened to the guys they'd imported in there to do the strike-breaking. He said, "Well, one of them was dwindled off here in a roadhouse brawl, and something happened to the other one over yonder in another roadhouse brawl, and he finally got gone. I don't know what happened to him." [Laughter] So after the AF of L told them to get back to work the best they could, then they came into the CIO along with us, and then we began to have some bargaining power.

RH: Because you had more CIO plants in Alcoa.

ALLEN: Well, that, and too, more individuals. It was a house-to-house campaign, and I'd go in a house and say, "I want you to join the union." They'd say, "No, if I join the union, I have three or four kids here, and the company'll fire me, and how'll I feed them?" I said, "If we get enough into the local that it'll be safe for you to join, you feel safe, will you join then?" "Yes." After a union held \_\_\_\_\_ up, they'd join. Badin was a very paternalistic-run company back then. They'd have one light bulb down from the ceiling. Your light bill was low, and your water bill was very low. The houses were unfinished inside. The two-by-fours were all showing all around the wall. You'd hang your pictures right between the two-by-fours. They had no screens in the houses. Had no bathtubs.

Had no commode there. [Laughter] You'd sit down on the seat, and it had a spring on it that'd pitch you out on the back porch. [Laughter] It was a rather primitive sort of way to live after coming off a nice ship, where you had everything you wanted. /I think probably most of the people that lived

and worked here were used to it and didn't notice it like we did. So we decided to do what we could about it, and it was a long, slow process. But I'll say this for Alcoa: during the two strikes and all the other time, there was never any physical violence whatsoever. We both recognized it for what it was. It was an economic battle, not a personal battle. Because we knew that when the strike was over, we'd go back to work and want to go back to work as friends with the foremen and the people around, and we didn't want any trouble, and the company certainly didn't give us any.

RH: You say it's an economic battle, but how did this paternalistic system fit into the situation?

ALLEN: I might include a little sidelight; don't let me wander too far off the track. For instance, on the grievance case we went up there, discussing that with the executive vice-president. And I happened to mention that we couldn't get anywhere with the plant manager, Mr. Copp. And Mr. Wilson grew hot about his face and said, "I'll have you to understand he's one of the finest southern gentlemen that I've ever seen." And I said, "Yes, his answer is very nice, but the answer is always no."

RH: What had you been asking him for?

ALLEN: A modification of bypassing the water. It would pull people out of the repair gang to go up on the dam when they had flood water and bypass the water. That was shift work. Our work was daylight work, seven till three-thirty. And our contention was that bypassing the water was shift work and really belonged under the operating force of the powerhouse, rather than to break up our repair gang and put us on all the different dams to bypass the water. It was finally resolved with the company placing a man up there to watch and to bypass the water. Put it shift work, and got things settled on that basis, after a good while.(?) And then, of course, much later on, they decided to do away with him, and now they're right back where



they were before. We settled the grievance on the basis of the man stayed on the dam, and it came under the shift worker. They did away with that man, and now they're right back with a river gang, with the repair force bypassing water again. I think possibly that could have been won before they arbitrated, and kept the way it was, which was settlement of a grievance. But that isn't the way it worked out.

RH: What about S.A. Copp's influence in the town?

ALLEN: Oh, he knew everybody in town. You'd go downtown, "Good morning, Cary, how are you this morning?" Like I say, it was purely a paternalistic system.

RH: Did that make people fearful of joining the union, or did that encourage them to want to join a union?

ALLEN: You see, a short time before then President Roosevelt had given the rights of the workers to organize, but still they were fearful of joining, afraid they'd lose their jobs. And once they realized that they did have federal protection . . .

[Interruption]

ALLEN: Like I said, about all the people that are concerned with the early days are gone now; they're dead. You'll just have to take my own case about it, because there aren't any ways to know things like that.

RH: How about the question about S.A. Copp? Did his paternalist influence that he had in the town encourage people to want to join the union?

ALLEN: No, on the contrary.

RH: They were fearful?

ALLEN: They were bitterly against unions.

RH: How did you finally convince them?

ALLEN: I don't know whether we ever convinced him or not. We just formed

a union, and then the government came down and took a vote. They went to the various places, to High Rock and all, and took the vote, and we won the vote and then sat down and negotiated a contract with the company.

RH: How did you win the vote?

ALLEN: They had a secret ballot, and the guys would go in and vote for the union or against the union. The union won by eleven votes out of over fifty working plants, so you see it was a very close election.

RH: This was in 1937.

ALLEN: I don't really know. I think so.

RH: But why did they vote for the union if, as you said, they were bitterly against it?

ALLEN: No, the individuals who worked for the company were not bitterly against a union. They simply feared joining a union because they thought they might lose their job if they did. So they had to be persuaded.

RH: What arguments did you use to persuade them?

ALLEN: Better working conditions, for one thing. A higher wage, possibly, if it could be negotiated, was another. We could institute a clean-up modification campaign in the houses that I had previously described to you. . The idea that was spreading over the country with the sit-down strikes in the automobile industry and the upswing of unionism in Big Steel. They were all persuading-type factors. Although I say that most of the early members of the union were single people; they didn't have a family. They had nothing to fear. If they lost their job, they could go down the road and get on another one, so they were willing to join.

RH: So the news of what was happening in the rest of the country was a factor in reducing people's fear about a union here?

ALLEN: Yes.



RH: Did you know O. B. Lackey?

ALLEN: Yes. He was a wonderful person. Only his family life was not so good. His wife's health was bad, eventually and went through a divorce and married again. He was in town here for the dedication of the union hall, the first time I'd seen him in years and years. Apparently he was very happy with his new marriage. He was about seventy-four or 'five.

RH: He was the first president of the AF of L union that you mentioned before?

ALLEN: Yes.

RH: Do you know anything about how he first decided that he wanted to start a union here?

ALLEN: No, I don't. He had done the best he could do with what he had to work with, and how he got connected with the union I don't know. His daughter was the organist down at the church, and because he left her mother, I don't know whether she ever forgave him or not. But for sure she should have, because he was a wonderful person.

RH: Do you know where he came from?

ALLEN: Before he came here, he worked in oil fields, I believe in Oklahoma. And he said he and his wife were laying there asleep one night and said the wind got up and took the roof off, and it started raining. Said there wasn't any use to try and do anything, so they just laid there in the rain till the next morning to see what happened. [Laughter]

RH: Do you know how old he was during the sit-ins in '36 when you first knew him?

ALLEN: No, I don't. I'd say he was thirty-five or forty years old, probably. Might not jive with what I said about his being seventy-four when he came up here, but he was somewhere around there.

RH: Do you know the names of the other people who were in that first AF of L union?

ALLEN: Red Pickman. You can visit him and talk with him. He'll give you a more objective view of the whole thing than I could, because he was simply a member and not concerned with the overall long-term objectives that Dean Culver and some of the rest of us had for the union.

RH: What were the long-term objectives that you and Dean Culver had?

ALLEN: To have a strong enough union built up to have some bargaining power and to better the conditions around town. Also, we've never had any trouble with the colored race, because when they attended the hall I made it a special point to say that "In the matter under discussion, somebody back there must have a different view, and this is a brotherhood, and get up on the floor and express your views." You see, they were very reluctant to speak on the issues, so we'd ask them to exercise their freedom of the floor to speak anytime they wanted to. So gradually they'd get up and point out the things in the plant that had to do with the article under discussion. Got them to talking then after a while, but it was a brotherhood of blacks and whites so we settled our potential racial problems way back in the very beginning with the brotherhood in the union hall, and we never had one bit of trouble here. This anti-segregation was not necessary in Badin, because we had desegregated long before.

RH: Was that a drawback to some of the people who were considering joining the union? Did they feel that perhaps they didn't want to enter into this brotherhood? Was that ever a factor for people?

ALLEN: No, I don't think so at all, because the whites and the blacks got along perfectly all right on the job. See, they worked together. They were good friends.

RH: But in the early days the blacks were in just the non-skilled jobs, and then whites were foremen and they were in the more skilled jobs, machinists and whatnot. And so that had to change over time, because in the beginning it wasn't set up so that the jobs were open to both races.

ALLEN: That's right, and we knew that it would be a long-term proposition; it wouldn't be a sudden thing. They would have to be trained. They would have to hire people with college skills and if they were mechanics, machinist skills and all that. It was a long, drawn-out process.

[Interruption]

RH: We were talking about the working out of the problem of blacks being in certain jobs and whites being in other jobs.

ALLEN: They were restricted as to their line of advancement. Yes, it was back then. There were certain jobs for whites and certain jobs for blacks. It was the old South, and the old South had to be broken down, traditions changed, and a new line of progression drawn up that would include blacks, such as qualifications the job. All that came much later. There wasn't any real reluctance on the part of the company to adopt the new lines of progression or the union, for that matter, but it had been a well-established way of life, and the divisions and all that sort of stuff had to be changed gradually. You couldn't be too abrupt; you'd rock the boat. So it had to be done a little bit, one here and one there and one over yonder, and then one

later. Then much, much later on the company and the union sat down together and gave each job a classification. For instance, if the heat was excessive, that would have counted so many points. If you had to climb to a height that was dangerous, that would have counted so many points. If you had a lot of smoke and fumes, <sup>it</sup> counted so many points. And then they were all evaluated. Then the job itself was given a classification and a pay scale.

So if a guy was going to get a new job or work for a new job, he knew what the job would pay and what the duties of the job were. They were laid out in the book, and you didn't have to figure that out and get that all together.

RH: I guess that's a lot of what Carlee Drye's administration was about.

ALLEN: Yes, he worked on that job classification project for quite a few years.

BEGIN TAPE I SIDE II

ALLEN: Carlee Drye quit being president to take a job with the International, and I was vice-president and took over.

RH: What do you remember about your administration?

ALLEN: Nothing in particular. It was fairly smooth. Although while Carlee Drye was still president, he went to negotiations and told me that there would in all probability be a strike, and he would call me up and tell me when to get the guys out of the plant. So he left me, in effect, in charge down here while he was up there. So, not knowing whether there was going to be a strike or not, I made an agreement with the plant personnel manager that the people could go on in their work, but if we heard they had gone on strike, he would pull the men out. Which they did. Kept their word. I got some criticism for going along, but it didn't hurt anything. It didn't hurt the relations between the union and the company to wait for nine hours(?). I didn't have a thought as far as that was concerned. So we heard, right after the eleven o'clock shift had went on to work, that they had gone on a strike. So the plant manager and his assistant went in and called the people back out. And the plant manager's dead and gone, also his assistant. A horse fell on him, and he died from complications, so they're neither

one around. Like I say, you'll have to take my word for it, because there's nobody left to worry about it.

PH: After the union was established, the company pulled away from its more paternalist practices.

ALLEN: Not for a long, long time. it could. Now there came a time when the company was trying to decide--at least they told us--whether Badin was paying off enough to continue to keep running here, or whether they would close Badin down and move to somewhere else. And they were making up their mind whether to modify, improve, and enlarge the plant, or to close it down. Then, during that period of time, the company had a rather unilateral approach to the situation: either you do this, or else. So they made a lot of changes before they built the new plant here, reorganized.

PH: How long did it take for the company to move away from the paternalist system?

ALLEN: The last move they made was this water business around here. They first turned over the electrical end to Duke Power Company and got out of the electric utilities. Then they discontinued picking up trash, which they had done before. Then they had a town band; they did away with that. Then they tore down the theater building. Built a post office where it was. It was a beautiful building. They discarded all the things not immediately connected to the operation of the plants. The latest one was the Greater Badin program they put on when they got untied from furnishing water to the town. They must have water for the plant. And they turned this over to the Greater Badin outfit, and my water bill went up \$4.50 for three months. A tremendous amount they pay for the store down here; their water bill run about \$700 a month. And they're still getting all kind

of kick-back and criticism about why they done it.(?)

RH: But in terms of S.A. Copp and his getting out and knowing everybody in town and the kind of administration he had and the way he would really play a part in the personal, daily lives of people in the town, when did that kind of intrusion of the plant into people's personal lives and their home lives start to change?

ALLEN: It was an accepted thing, and nobody had any kick about it, as far as I know. It was the way it had always been around, and it was the way it continued to be around until these gradual modifications could be made, and the transition carried out to the present day, in fact. Now we have none of that, and all the necessities of life have been transferred from the company to the individual.

RH: What was J. B. Holmes like?

ALLEN: I only met him one time, under very adverse circumstances. I was the grievance committeeman for the powerhouse gang--or the river gang;

It was the maintenance crew for the powerhouse--and I had to take a grievance to the committee. And they asked for the plant manager to be there. Normally it would have been handled by the immediate foreman, by our superintendent. Well, they asked <sup>for</sup> the plant manager to be there. After seeing the presentation of a grievance, had a very difficult job that had to be done, so we might as well get on with it. The difficulty being that a man would be told by his immediate foreman how to do something in the powerhouse, and it had to be done right. Those are huge machines down there. If you get a chance, go down and look at them.

RH: I've seen them.

ALLEN: One of the rotors weighs 160 tons. And pulling those things out or tearing the generator apart, you had to be so very protected, because if it could swing over it'd take the whole wall of the powerhouse out. So we'd



keep on each rotor, because if you didn't stop it in time, it would swing and go; it was about sixty feet down, so it would go along and knock the side of the powerhouse out. Anyway, we'd get our instructions from the immediate foreman. Get about halfway through a job, the next guy in line'd come along and say, "What are you doing? That's no way to do it. The way to do it is this way." Then along come a guy that topped him a little bit and say, "What are you doing?" In all probability, he'd go back to the first way you were told to do it. And my job when I took the grievance was to point out the fact they should have one man to do the telling. And that if you're having somebody to tell you to do it and another guy can come along and tell you to do it a different way, it's detrimental to a guy's sense of craftsmanship and that something should be worked out. Old Mr. Holmes never said a word. I don't know of any big disagreements we had with him. He was a very quiet sort of fellow according to my own immediate personal contact with him. You're going to have to edit the hell out of this.

RH: [Laughter]

ALLEN: His personal life was not so good. I think his wife wound up in an asylum, and I'm not so sure of that. But anyway, he didn't get married a second time. When he retired, he went downhill

. . .

What you're doing is an in-depth analysis of the growth of the town.

RH: Yes, that's right, and I'm trying to figure out how the union fits into the story.

ALLEN: A guy came down here from Pittsburgh. We had no screens on the houses, and flies walked around over his face when he was trying to sleep late in the morning. He got mad about that, and he went back up, and they

had a union paper out at that time--the CIO News, I believe it was called-- he went back up there and headlined the next paper that came out up there "Put Badin Back in the United States." [Laughter] He mentioned the flies and no screens. So then the company gave us the privilege, if you wanted screens in the houses, it'd cost you so much more in your rent a month. See, the rent was very, very low; I don't know what it was. If you wanted a bathtub in the house, that'd be a little more rent.

RH: So this image of Alcoa building a town that was very, very sanitary, that had all the modern conveniences, was really not true at the time? There were certain things about the living conditions here that were unsatisfactory?

ALLEN: They weren't satisfactory, no. Not satisfactory at all. No, the company. . . . It was so very hot over there in the pot rooms. They kept the doors down on the theory that if they could keep the heat in the pots, it would make more aluminum. The gasses that were given off in the pot--fluorine gasses and the various other gasses--would blister the guys' faces, and they'd have to put salve on their faces. Also, they would take heat cramps, and they'd have a gang of them laying out beside the first aid building down there with their muscles knotted up with heat cramps. And it needed a lot of changes. Of course, that's the way they'd always run everything, and somebody had to get busy and try to make things a little bit better for the people that come after. We had reached a stalemate. We had got all in the local union we could get. So one night we had a normal meeting down at the union hall. Somebody made a motion to go down to the gates and see if we couldn't sign up the crew that was going in. We went down to the gates. And it was the best thing for the union that ever happened and the worst thing for the company. Because the company

said we were trespassing on the company's property. We weren't on the company property

So they had their own police force or guard duty, which is one and the same thing. So they proceeded to load us all up in cars and carry us off and put us in jail. And after we got out of jail, the guys that had been reluctant to sign up said, "Well, they can't treat you folks like that. Give me a card. I want to sign up with the union." So that was the deciding factor, really, on how the union started.

Something had to be done; we had reached all we could do, and we just decided to take that one big chance, get locked up. A big enough disturbance that they would go ahead and see if they can accomplish that.

The government sent down a referee in the courts. The North Carolina judge said, "I believe the referee pointed out that the automobile workers have been permitted to organize a union in the company property, and it was in our rights." The judge said, "Well, I'm going by North Carolina law. Three people come up to the mob up there, asked them to disperse, and they wouldn't disperse." So we had a class trial, and one

him just like all the rest of us, I think, because possibility in the world

But out of it all came, like I say, a unification. It had a big effect on the organizing.

RH: Then the union served in such a way as to keep the company on its toes, to provide the people here in Badin with what it is that they needed and wanted. And that, in turn, had an effect of keeping people satisfied about working at Alcoa?

ALLEN: We didn't press on these home improvements too much. We were all in it, till the company simply closed the door on us. I mean, "You can have these things, provided we go up on the rent to take care of the cost."

RH: I don't mean just about the homes, but I mean also about working conditions and wages.

ALLEN: The working conditions were changed over a period of time involving grievance cases, winning some of them, losing some. In fact, the plant personnel manager told me one time, "Why can't we settle our troubles in the local plant instead of carrying them to Pittsburgh to an arbitration board up there, and keep all this dirty laundry <sup>from being</sup> out in public?" And I said, "Well, in that last grievance case we had and won. . . ." He said, "Yes, I think that we should have won that grievance case." I said, "So there is your answer why we have to take the dirty linen out, because you're still convinced that you should have won it, and we were convinced that we should have won it, and we did, and [laughter] you still aren't convinced that you have lost justly, so what alternative do we have except carry it to the board up there?" I think it was nineteen<sup>men</sup> or something like that, but they took it before the arbitrator, and the arbitrator's decision was final. If the arbitration board could not reach a consensus of opinion, then it would go to the arbitrator, and his word was binding on the union and the company. Whatever he said, we had to do. Of course, most of the time it would be settled before it got to the arbitrator, by the board. However, it would get out of the hands of the local here, bargaining with the local.

RH: When the organizing was going on, did you have organizers from out of town come in and help you, or was it mostly an internal effort?

ALLEN: I'm trying to remember if we had any.

RH: Carlee mentioned one man named Nick Zanolich.

ALLEN: Nick Zanolich was elected president of the Aluminum Workers International while we were up there at New Kensington. And Nick came down

a few times, but he didn't take any active part in going around town, as far as I know, trying to get the union going. Nick died here just a very short time ago of cancer. Later on he was in charge of the Southern Organizing Committee for the combined AF of L-CIO.

RH: What years were they?

ALLEN: I don't know. Whenever they joined the Steel Workers, Nick took a job with the combined bodies as an organizer, and he ran into some pretty rough customers and got beat up once or twice.

He was a very outward-going person and the type of person to make a good organizer, because he was not afraid about calling a strike.

We kept in contact over the years, writing letters back and forth.

RH: Do you have any theories about <sup>what</sup> role the union did play in the development of this town?

ALLEN: Yes, it played a very primary role. In fact, it furnished the impulse for all the improvements that have occurred in Badin. Now I can prove that to you very definitely. We would get mimeographed copies, and we'd often go over to the textile industry and stand at the gates to give them out. And they'd tell us, "Why don't you go back to Badin and leave us alone? We're doing all right here." And they are still operating under the same paternalistic system that Badin was under whenever I came to town. You can go over and see what their wages are and talk to those people over there and see what we had to contend with from the very beginning. It seemed to be an insurmountable odds against us when we first started, because Alcoa had all the millions of dollars. Andrew Mellon, and he was the Secretary of the Treasury, and all that kind of stuff. A gang of guys with a small amount of education to combat their company corporation lawyers and all that kind of stuff whenever

we had grievances and things to settle. Can't you understand what a job we were taking on? If you don't, I did.

RH: How do you explain the success that you had here as opposed to the situation in the textile mills?

ALLEN: I don't know. I started to say that educational-wise and intellectual-wise that we were a little bit ahead of them, but I wouldn't say that. I don't know. You take J. P. Stevens. They've won elections, but J. P. Stevens absolutely refused to sit down and agree to a contract. And they still are. And they say the new president said he's going to continue the same way they used to, so you can figure it out for yourself.

RH: So you think some of it had to do with the company that you were dealing with.

ALLEN: Oh, it had all to do with it. And then you had the long tradition of, the cotton mills have always had a low pay scale. And since the major industry of North Carolina is textiles, I count the fact that North Carolina, I think, is about the forty-seventh in per capita income, dragging down the low pay and the textile industry probably has more to do with it than anything else. Of course, the South now is opening up to new industries, and that will eventually, I hope, lead to better pay and better working conditions in the textile industry. But we were told flatly to go back where we came from. We tried to tell them the advantages of having a pension plan for the old folks when they retire. I was at the Fish Camp one night, and an old fellow said, "Well, I made my last one today. I got laid off." And I had no business getting into the discussion. Said, "Of course, you don't mind that. You'll get a nice pension, and insurance will take care of you if you get sick." "Well, I don't get any of that stuff."



I said, "Maybe you people had better not throw your little pamphlets we came over and gave out." Their company had promised them better wages and all that kind of stuff, better working conditions. "So far as I know, all you got out of it, they sanded the floors in the mill." And my wife was saying, "Sit down, sit down." And all the other folks around were mostly mill hands that came up there, because it was run by two people that had worked in the mill or still worked in the mill, the Fish Camp. She was telling me to "Sit down, sit down," because there were more and more people entering the argument. [Laughter] And I said, "No. I stood over at the gate and gave out pamphlets how they could improve their conditions, and I was treated the way I was. Now leave me alone and let me get through talking, and I'll sit back down." They still get a chance, and they still haven't.

RH: But the people who you're saying were telling you just to go away and weren't interested, they were the working people who you were talking to in the textile mills.

ALLEN: Oh, I don't know. I can't remember. Said, "If you don't like working conditions here, you can always go down the road and find something better somewhere else." Don't you see? And my answer to that was, "That if somebody doesn't stay here and somebody doesn't straighten it out, it'll never get straightened out. So we'll do what we can. We may not succeed, but at least we'll try."

RH: From what I understand, the International Aluminum Workers of America union had a reputation as being sort of a company union, as opposed to . . .

ALLEN: No, I don't think so. I don't know what it became. As I said before, I had six years in the Navy. Whenever the War broke out, the morning

a neighbor told me that they had bombed Pearl Harbor, I went over to Charlotte and tried to sign up. They wouldn't take me on account of my eyes. And then I paid my way down to Raleigh, and they told me the same thing. I come back and got my eyes examined. Said I had astigmatism; the only thing I could do was wear glasses. So .

[End of interview]