

Ironworkers Documentation Project

**AUDIO LOG FORM**

Interviewer's recording no(s): BH IW 1 [Ryan]

Contact: John Ryan (Interview #1)

Interviewer: Bucky Halker

Interview:

Date: July 27, 2011

Place: Union Headquarters, Local #63, 2525 W. Lexington, Broadview, IL 60155

Other people present: None

Background noise:

Equipment used: The Local IWU 63 headquarters can be a bit noisy and this can be heard in the background. It's an industrial building for the most part, so the cooling and heating system is a regular problem. Occasionally, the building even generates a line noise that is impossible to keep off the recording. Sometimes you can also hear people in the office section talking and laughing or somebody will walk into the room.

Equipment used: Marantz PMD 661 digital recorder and Shure SM57 microphone

Recording medium used: Transcend 8 gigabyte SD memory card, uncompressed WAV format.

Recording engineer: Bucky Halker

**Summary description of audio interview contents:**

Ryan discusses his background, his entrance into the ironworker trade, important sites he's work on in Chicago, unions, strikes, the labor-management situation in Chicago, and jokes and ritual.

**Audio Interview Contents**

Counter

No./Time

Topic

00:01 Introduction

[I'm sitting here with John Ryan. John, where were you born?] In Chicago. [And what year were you born?] 1941. What's unusual, it's... The date of my birth didn't mean too much over the years but it was 9-11-41. [So it's taken on... Yeah, its kind of hard to celebrate, isn't it?] It has taken on a new meaning. [Yeah. What area of town were you born in and grew up in?] It was probably considered the northwest side of Chicago. It's Diversey and Kostner. I suppose the areas that might be familiar would be the Olson Rugs and Hall Printing. I went to Schurtz High School, went all four years there. [Did you get into ironworking right out of high school? How did you get into the craft?] Well, I thought I would go to the junior college. I went to Wright for a couple of years. And, of course, I finally decided that I wasn't going to complete a college education. And that the best thing to do at that time, was to get into the building trade. The bus drivers and the other occupations that I looked at, they didn't make the kind of money that the trade people make. They were up a little higher than the average person. So I thought, ok, that's something that I would try. My introduction to that was that my Mom worked for the local as a secretary in the... [At #63?] ...at #63 in the Health and Welfare Department. She helped Ray Robinson, who was the apprentice coordinator at that time, with mimeographs that they made and the stencils that they made for the school. And I had an opportunity to see what some of that stuff looked like. So I had in the back of my mind, you know, some of the things that went on with the ironworkers. In high school, I got into the auto shop and the electric shop and stuff like that. It's more physical. I like digging into things, the mechanicals. And I said well, the year that I got out of high school, I worked as a carpenter for some buildings downtown here. And had an idea and see what the ironworkers were like. I thought it's better than what I was doing as a laborer for the carpenters. I could have gotten into the carpenters local or the plumbers local, because when I got married, my wife's family was involved in plumbing. At that time, you know, they talk about who you had connections with and where you got your help from. We had problems at that time with minorities getting into trades and saying that we were discriminated against and they weren't really. At that time they were discriminating against anybody that didn't have a father, a brother, uncle or somebody in the trade. And I keep thinking about it and that almost, I thought, stemmed from the English apprentice systems where you get someone that got you into the apprenticeships, you know, and you had those connections that got you in. So, I decided I was going to be a tradesman. So I got into it that way.

3:58 [What was the first job that you worked on as an ironworker? Was it in the city and what kind of work?] Yeah, you know... I got married in August of '63 so I had my application in as an ironworker to get in. Then in September I got a call. Thinking back at it now, starting in the building trades in September, going into the winter, that was really something else. So I started in September and I think one of the first jobs that I had that I remember... I worked for a fire escape outfit on the side of the building. And they were hanging these iron pieces of fire escape, the stairs, and the platforms and stuff like that. [The accordion ones that come down?] Yeah, on the side of the buildings. They were almost getting ready to phase them out. [I was thinking that, yeah] They were still doing it and still repairing it. And that was one of my first jobs. [And were you like a, were you a welder when you were doing that stuff? What kind of...] No, I was an apprentice. You were... [You did whatever?] Yeah. You did the gophers, you did the painting, the carrying and the hauling. Stuff like that, you know. [How long did

your apprenticeship last then?] My apprenticeship lasted for four years. At the time I was with that company, the fire escape company, they were talking about getting me in an indentured apprenticeship. The indenture apprenticeship at that time was you worked...hmm... You could work with one journeyman in an indentured apprentice where the rules were two journeymen and an apprentice. So they had some leeway, I guess in their bidding or whatever. And they could bring you into the shop to work, if there was nothing on the field. Well, I didn't get the indentured apprenticeship with that particular company. I'm not sure what happened, but I wound up leaving there. And in our trade, you could get laid off, you'd go to the hall, and they'd try to find you another job. I did get another job with an iron company. I'm trying to think of the name of it at the time but ahh...Architectural Iron... But while I was there they did have an indentured apprentice with them who got his book, so there was an opening. And I was brought in as their indentured apprentice which gave me full time work. They almost guaranteed you the 40 hours. And you could make up those other conditions where you could work in their shop and get work or you could work with one of the men in the field. [So you were guaranteed a 40 hour week.] Basically and I remember one time, I think it was my 4<sup>th</sup> year, things were slow out in the field and I had to go... I had moved from the city. I went out to Schaumburg, which was way out of the way at that time. Their company was down at 1030 East 87<sup>th</sup> Street. They wanted me to come down and work in their shop. And I said, "Ok." Well, I got involved because of my affiliation with my mom working in the hall and with the union. I was pro-union. So I would always go to the meetings. And there was, at that time, they were talking about things were getting really busy and they were looking for certified welders. In my 4<sup>th</sup> year, I was a certified welder. I went and asked my superintendent if they could loan me out. And I could go to work as a certified welder rather than going all the way down to 1030 East 87<sup>th</sup>. And he said, "Yeah." So I got a job in January as a certified welder in the NBC Studios, inside, because I was certified. And the fella I was with, I had worked with before with another company, and he said, "You are the foreman because you're the welder." Even though I was an apprentice at that time, I was the foreman on that job. So I started as a foreman. [Were you comfortable with that?] Oh yeah, because I had worked already, you know, as a, the last year I had a number of years in, three years in already. So I was comfortable running work. I knew how to do things and the guy I was with, he worked with me on jobs and I was almost like running it then when he was working with me.

8:58 [So after you finished the NBC job, what kind of...over the next few years, where did you work? Any buildings that you might think of and what kind of work were you doing there?] Oh yeah. One of my first jobs that I worked on, I think, it was the... right there on Michigan Avenue and the River...oh, I can't think of the name of that building off hand but it was a high rise. When I went to look at it and I looked at this high rise, I figured, oh my God. I don't know if I want to go up that. And I found out that when you... The Prudential Building... [couldn't be this building as it was finished years before that] No, it wasn't the Prudential. Maybe it was that... I can't remember off hand, but when you start out on some of the buildings, you start out low and you come up, it's fine. When you come in and the building is already 40-50 stories up, then it gets kind of...a little scary so to speak. But you get into it and it's like standing on a floor any place. It's your work area and you get used to it. We didn't have all that tie off stuff that they have now...and when they started that, we felt like we were getting our hand strapped behind our back and then say, "Go work on the job." I remember on that particular building, they used to plank the floors like every 5<sup>th</sup> floor or 4<sup>th</sup> floor, and it was open from where they were setting the structural to where the support was. We used to have to walk the beams out to the parameter of the

building...and ahh...actually look down into the building. So as an ornamental man, it was kind of leery but you got out there and you did it.

10:57 [Were you doing welding then too? Is that the stuff you were doing?] We wound up doing everything, all the welding and the burning and the capping and the drilling. And we had to know all those aspects of putting steel up. Or when something broke, how to fix it. [Now when you were working those buildings and you were doing that, especially welding, didn't Local #1 have a lot of welders too or not? Would you be in competition sometimes with them or mostly did you get along ok?] We got along fine and even within some of the composite crews. We had worked on the Illinois Centers and those were composite groups. We had an ornamental man who was running the building, on the skin of the building, and we had a lot of welding on there. In those days, you went on a job site and you certified on the job site, you welded for 8 hours to take the test. And they'd get a day's pay for taking the test, saying in fact, you were qualified to weld on that building, which I have managed to pass a number of times. I don't recall not passing it. So the school that they set up, they prepared us for those kind of tests. [Yeah. That was Washburn? Or no, you didn't do Washburn.] No, they already... Well, we did Washburn for a short time. We did our school there. Then they started the school here. At that time, ours was...yeah. We were just at Washburn. We had our own little facility at Washburn for the trade.

12:42 [In Chicago, did you work with the same company all the time? Some of the guys I've been talking to back in '63 worked for the same contractor for 12-13 years. Did you move around, or just depending on what the particular job was?] Most of the time when you had a job as an apprentice, you stayed with that company for the four years. The company I was indentured to, I was with for like three years 'til I got my card. There were some labor conditions that I thought I was slighted on. And I made mention to them that I needed some correction. I thought I was going on to a job and somebody else came on it and I thought I was entitled to it, and they didn't see my way. And I would do the indentured thing with them and everything. They let me go over a Mickey Mouse kind of decision. And when I left that, I thought, oh boy. What am I gonna do? I'm out of work. At that time, there were jobs around. You could go and get a job here and get a job there and the ironworkers, some of them were prima donnas in the sense that you don't like the way I'm working, I'm going to go to work right next door. And so there were jobs you could go to. We had people going from job to job to job. Generally at that time, you stayed with a company for a long time, for years. While I was out looking, I managed to get...because I moved out to Schaumburg, I had stopped and inquired at Schmidt Iron, which was right out there, if they were looking for anybody. In fact, there was a spot and I hooked on with a fellow as a partner and it wasn't about two years or less than that that he left to go out to Wyoming. I filled in a position as a foreman for them, and I had a truck that I ran for 12 years. I was working steady for 12 years. Then some other union things came up and we didn't see eye to eye and it was time for me to move on. After that, wherever I went, I started on a crew and before you know it, I was running the work. I was always running work no matter where I went. You know, if you had a job, a couple of different jobs in a year, for me, that was a lot. There was a time... I'm trying to think of the years... It was in the '70s sometime, I believe. One year I had 13 employers. But things were really slow and what I did is that when I was out of work, I just didn't sign up at the hall and say I was waiting. I'd get out on the street. I started going around, I'd go to job sites and I'd talk to guys that I knew. One fella that I thought of in particular, he was roofing his house on a weekend, and I stopped by and said hello to him. I asked him how things were going and he said, "All right." And I said, "Do you have any work?" And he says, "Oh, my

apprentice is going on vacation for awhile and I'm going to need a man for a week or so." Well, that wound up to be a couple of months. You know. And I never turned down a job. You know, they had one day jobs, two day jobs and it wound up being 1-2 years.

16:28 [Were some of them more interesting jobs? Are there any you recall because the building was a historic building or the kind of work you were doing...?] Everything from... I was on the top of the Sears Tower in the tubes. We put the ladders and platforms in the tubes. And then put the clips on the top of the Tower for the cover. And AP [Associated Press] came out and they wanted some pictures of... They started hanging some antennas off the up side and one of the guys came in, one of the press guys, and said, "I'm not going up there." He said, "Could you go up and take some pictures?" And he said, "Don't tell anybody." And I said, "Yeah." So I climbed up to the top and leaned over the side and took some pictures for them. From the top of the Sears Tower, my lowest job was I worked for the deep tunnel project. And we put ladders and platforms in the deep tunnel project, at Lawndale and 55<sup>th</sup> or whatever it was. And that was 250 feet in the ground. So I've been every place. [You've pretty much done the highest job in Chicago and the lowest.] Yup. One of the fascinating jobs I had was Ameritech. We were doing some work there. The terminology on the blueprints was "museum quality, stainless and bronze." So we had to do that kind of fine work and precision work and make precise cuts and make things look really great. Some of the other jobs that I worked on... I had three years at O'Hare Field, on the building of the United Terminal, and that was nice because it was so close to the house here, you know? That was nice. [And what kind of work did you do there?] The skin, the curtain wall on the job. Again, I was there a short time and Flower City made me a general foreman for 'em. So it was nice in that it was one of my first jobs I had as a general foreman and you're directing. You're putting people in position, working with the tools. You have to know what has to be done, but to get the right guys in the right jobs. So again I had three years there which was great.

19:08 [One thing I noticed from talking with all you guys is that it seems like ironworkers, one of the things that's really distinctive about your craft is that you had to do a lot of different things, most of you, but you have to use your brains a lot. You guys have to figure out things all the time, like puzzle solvers.] You know, that's exactly what we are because we get some of the conditions, and one of the unique jobs I had was working at Navy Pier on the connections on the roof tubing systems. You know... They get some contractors and designers that design things and sometimes you can't put them together because they are designed to the point where you can't... So you have to figure out how to put them together and get them together right and in the right sequences. So yeah, you have to interpret, you have to make do, and you get it done. Make it presentable. Yeah, sometimes...again, you know... Thinking about what you're doing. There are certain things that are definitely plum and perfect and might not look good. So you have to make it look good. It may be out of plum a little bit, but it has to look good. So we have to know when to do that.

20:35 [Did you ever have to go out on strike? I know you said you are a real pro-union guy. Did you ever have to?] Yeah. You know we've been on picket signs. Even since I've been retired, I help out if they need some bodies for pickets. We've been on the pickets a number of times. [Are these mostly just one job site, they're not like through the whole city or something?] Sometimes they can be, but what happens in our trade... It seems as though the negotiating group that we deal with are united and they hold to not working, but there's fringe companies that say, "We can't stop. We've got to keep working.

We'll sign our agreement saying whatever you guys finally decide on. We'll pay." So we've been able to have some strikes being effective and having a lot of our members still working. So that's worked out. As far as a complete dead shut down, I don't know that I've ever seen that. You know, we've been shut down to people who don't sign the contract.

21:52 [A lot of the guys, too, have talked about the fact that in general around Chicago, it seems like employers and the ironworkers get along pretty well. Have you felt that way over the years?] Yeah. They negotiate well. When I got into the business, they were dealing with quarters and nickels and dimes. And they were able to settle on that. Even as the increase in the demands, they've been able to agree on so we haven't been out on strike for any length of time. They finally agree to what we have and what we need. What is going on generally in the city as far as demands for wages and benefits. [Why do you think that the employers, the contractors and the ironworkers in Chicago, have been able to do that? It doesn't happen in every other city. Do you think there is something distinct about Chicago?] In our local, we had 1000 members at that time. You know, there might be a little more now. It's not like 10s of 1,000s. They agreed to the terms because it would put companies under. It would... I think what they see also is that it depends aren't unreasonable, that we stay kind of within some limits. We have to be competitive in our bidding because we had people trying to get the work that we do. So we have to be in that range also. So, yeah, I think there's a good relationship between the local and the contractors. Sometimes they play hardball but in the long run, they figure out what has to be done, in order to keep things going, stay in business, and make some money.

24:02 [I've asked the other guys about this and maybe you can answer it too. When you first started, did the older guys play a lot of jokes on you, do you remember? Or did you do that to younger guys? Some guys said they didn't have any problems, some guys said they really got harassed when they first started.] I think what happens is that... I never had any jokes played on me or anything adverse. But there are certain people that get affected by practical jokes and other people take advantage of that. And so if you were susceptible to that or it bothers you, and they find you vulnerable, of course, they'll needle you. But generally, no. I never had any problem with that. Other than tell an apprentice to go get some shoreline. You know... [Make stuff up.] Yeah. I remember we had one of the guys, who is a member now, he was working on a permit and it was strange because I'd asked him to get some MEK and I gave him a Styrofoam cup. He put the MEK in a Styrofoam cup and he took two steps and the bottom just fell out. You know? And it happened like a second or third time to the same guy. He didn't learn. Well, you know, we try not to get too bad as far as jokes on guys.

25:50 [When you finish projects, do you have any ceremonies or anything like that that you did? Rituals, I know topping off was something a lot of guys did.] Usually we'll have a flag raising when we finish the job. That was kind of a normal thing with ironworkers. Sometimes we'd do it with the curtain walls that we put up. I have a picture here showing one of the ceremonies that we kind of had... Hmm... The building themselves a lot of times would have a topping off party. Years ago it was tables set up with and they brought food in and liquor and everything. They've kind of gotten away from that because of the problems with the liquor. Of course, ironworkers are kind of prone to overdo it. It was strange because over the years, I remember, there were some people that were really bad as far as liquor went. It got to the point where as a foreman, if a guy came to a job after a weekend where he'd be partying or even in the evening, and he'd come back and he was still tipsy from the night before... Some people get fired. I'd

take the guy to the side and say, “Hey you can go home. Come back tomorrow.” Some of the parties kind of got out of hand but they’ve stopped that since then...and put the controls on that.

27:28 [Were you ever involved in any jurisdictional disputes with other unions? Carpenters, glazers?] I remember a couple of times, but I can’t think of a particular situation. Sometimes they just wanted your input and they’d take a testimony of the job you were on and what you were doing and how long you'd been with a particular company and that type of work. But nothing specific as far as...that I can remember we had a problem with.

28:13 [Well, I want to thank you for your interview. I want to take a look at your photographs and take some shots of those. Does that sound okay with you?] That would be great. [I might come back and ask you some questions about musky fishing too.] [But thanks John for your interview. I really appreciate it.]

END 28:30