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### Oral History Interview: Sharon Trimble

Sharon Trimble

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ORAL HISTORY

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DATE December 5, 1983

Sharon K. Trimble  
(Signature - Interviewee)

2116 Emerson St.  
(Address)

Ashland Ky 41101

DATE 5 December 1983

Jan O. Riley  
(Signature - Witness)

/KIMBLE, SHARON K.  
12-5-83

WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN

WVW.15

"OUR WORKING LIVES" - LABOR UNION WOMEN

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: SHARON TRIMBLE

CONDUCTED BY: BEN RILEY

DATE OF INTERVIEW: DECEMBER 5, 1983

Ben: My name is Ben Riley. We're doing an interview with Sharon Trimble, Ashland, Kentucky, on December 5th, 1983. Mrs. Trimble, I understand that you're involved with union activities, of General Telephone of Ashland. Can you tell me when did your involvement with GTE begin?

Sharon: Well, first of all I work for General Telephone, but my union is Communication Workers of America. I first became involved with the union about July, 1972, when I became employed with General Telephone.

Ben: And that was at the Ashland location?

Sharon: That was in Lexington, Kentucky.

Ben: Did you become immediately involved in the union at that time?

Sharon: Oh...yes, doing some, well, at that time, communication workers hereinafter referred to as CWA, and General Telephone did not have a closed agency shop provision in their Contract. Uh, therefore, union membership and dues paying was optional. I had been raised in a labeled family, I had been raised with union activities and beliefs and I knew and had been told that if there was a union there, I better get involved. So, immediately upon my hiring to the telephone company in Lexington, I sought out a union representative and asked for a union card.

Ben: So your initial contact with the union was just simply as a member?

Sharon: As a member, yes.

Ben: How many years did you serve membership before coming actively involved in union activities?

Sharon: Oh, approximately 4 1/2 years. During which time I transferred to the Ashland office, where I am now. And I really didn't...well, I have to take that back. I have to say I actively became involved in July of 1973. I came to the Ashland office in March of '73. At that time, I of course, transferred my membership uh, Lexington CWA and Ashland CWA are both under the same contract with General Telephone. However, they are two different locals, so your membership must be transferred. Mine was. I came here in March of 1973, was a fairly new person obviously. Didn't even realize at the time that contract negotiations were going on. I got up one morning, dropped my little boy off at Day Care. This was on a Monday, went to work, and found a picket line [laughter]. That was my first real involvement with a strike. I immediately got out of the car and said, "What's going on?" They said, "well, you know..." They knew I was new. They went on to explain to me that our contract was up, they had not reached a tentative agreement, therefore at midnight that night we had gone out on strike. That began my real involvement with the union, in 1973.

We had a 6 and 1/2 month long strike and obviously during that length of time people became very close and very interested and very active in what's going on. Because that was our livelihood.

Ben: So you did serve time on the picket line at that time?

Sharon: Oh, yes, yes. Many, many hours on the picket line. Many hours working inside the union hall. There were many, many...our union is nationwide. We take in many, many facets of different businesses. At that time, we were more telephone company oriented than we are today. We're so diversified today we're in to everything. We have got approximately...I couldn't even begin to guess...hundreds of thousands of members nationwide. When Communication Workers first came into effect, way back in the early 1900's uh, the people realized at that point in time, what a battle they were up against with the Bell Telephone Company. The little independent companies like General Telephone were more or less kind of out of the picture at the time. So, what they decided to do was in order to defend themselves and have a lot of power against a big company like AT & T, was that out of every membership dollar that was taken, they would put 50 cents per person into a fund that we call our defense fund. Our defense fund today is in the millions of dollars. And has saved many, many lives during the course of the telephone industry and our union...because this is what happened. In 1973, when we went out on strike, obviously the income stopped. You have to have funds to survive. We have guidelines, we have rules that we go by. But what the defense fund basically does is that it provides a food allowance for the members on strike who are in good standing. They will pay your mortgage on your home or your rent, whatever the case may be, your utility bills, car payments if necessary. The whole intent of the fund is not to let anyone on strike serving and working for CWA, which you are at that time, lose anything. Medical insurance of course, is carried through our company. That we had to draw a line with. People who had pre-existing illnesses you know, that were, that needed to be treated, continuously we paid their hospitalization. That's how I became as involved as I was. That's how I realized what, how big our union was, what we were really doing, and what we needed to get done.

Ben: Is that type program unique to CWA?

Sharon: No, that's available to all CWA members, but to my knowledge, I don't know of any other union in the country that has a setup like ours. Not even the steelworkers, not even the biggest unions in this country. I don't recall anybody else having that type of setup. Most of the time in a strike situation locals from anywhere in the nation will pull together. They will send donations to the other locals. And the members who are on strike and needing help will draw from the money that way, from the local level. Of course, we have our local treasury. Our dues that are taken on, from our checks are sent directly to our national headquarters in Washington. Then the national takes a part obviously for government, nation, worldwide, and part of that money

comes back to the local, so there are two different treasuries there involved that a member can draw from.

Ben: Do you feel that this setup has made the CWA stronger in their ability to deal with the uh, with the company on a bargaining basis?

Sharon: Definitely, definitely. We could have stayed out, I mean it takes a long time to draw out millions of dollars. And a local the size of our especially. Of course, nationwide uh, \_\_\_\_\_ system has national bargaining, the general systems probably will go to that...that type of bargaining before very much longer. Simply for uh, oh...for the security involved in it. There are more CWA members in the Bell Company than there are in the general company. Obviously, if 200,000 people went on strike, even two or three or four million dollars is not gonna last a real long time. But the Bell System people have got enough bargaining power with their contracts all coming due at the same time that with the exception of this past summer where they had a 2-week strike, I can't remember a Bell Company nationwide being on strike. You know, that I can even remember. Maybe locally, if \_\_\_\_\_ issue, but nationwide this past summer's the first one that I can ever remember in my life. So obviously, yes, it does give us quite a bit of bargaining power. If the people are not hungry standing on the picket line...but when your children aren't going hungry and your family's not going hungry, you're not losing your home, it makes it a lot easier to be strong.

Ben: Going back to union membership, within the phone company, the general system, what would you estimate the split between male/female membership?

Sharon: [pause] Well...today I would say that there are probably more female, maybe 3 to 1 ratio, I would say right now. Male to female. Females to male, whatever. Uhm...a lot of the work that was traditionally male work, women are moving into it. Uh, a lot of jobs, male and female are being attritioned because of the changing technology of the telephone industry. And I would have to say that probably your so-called male-type jobs are the ones that have been the most affected to this point. However, I do believe that that's gonna change very shortly.

Ben: Uhm...yes, I would have to say the majority I would. However, not to the point that it was even 10 years ago. Women are becoming more active, daily, they're becoming more educated daily, they are in many cases the sole income for families. [inaudible]...husbands are laid off, and the women are working. And the women know how important it is to keep that income coming. Because that's what their family is surviving on. And they're gettin' out there and they're fightin' for their jobs. Therefore, they're doing whatever is necessary. They're going into the position that had been traditionally male because even with equal opportunity, those type jobs do pay more than the traditional office type work that people think about a female doing.

Ben: To what point in your membership did you become an officer?

Sharon: Well, I'm not an officer, an elected officer. What I am is a job steward, and that probably came around 1975. After the strike in '73, I became very active at that time. There are many things, many jobs in running a local that the elected officers as in cabinet or any club or any other organizations, can't possibly do completely; they need help. And that is where I began. After the '73 strike, we came back to work in '74 I believe it was, and we had a very short contract. In fact, it was a very critical time in the telephone industry nation-wide, not just here, but everywhere. We went back out on strike in November of '75. That was another 5 month one. We had just reached a settlement right at Christmas time that year, and we all went back to work in various stages in the early months of January. And from that point on, I had been an active steward.

Ben: At the time you became a job steward, was that an accepted position for women? Or was that a new situation?

Sharon: It was an accepted position for women as long as they stayed in their departments where the men worked. I mean, an outside plant person probably would not have thought of coming to me to help him with a grievance at that time. It was okay to do that, but you were supposed to stay within your own guidelines. Uh, that has changed. There again, women just don't take a back seat any more. If they want to go, they go, you know. And I believe that the men are recognizing that. Uh...they're getting more credit where credit's due, in a lot of instances--in a lot they're not. But I think that's true with any minority situation.

Ben: So you don't find a continued hesitancy on the part of male employees that come to you with their problems. (not any more, no)

Sharon: [pause] I think we're at the point now where well, it's just like, even though I'm not in an elected position, any time that you're in a serving capacity, whether it be elected or not, I feel like you have to earn the respect of your co-workers. I feel that they have to have confidence in you. And I think once that level of respect has been achieved, and they know you mean business, and they know you don't care to get in there and fight for them, then I don't think it matters any more, whether you're male or female. I think at that point they know the job's getting done, and that's the, seems to be the acceptance of whether or not I, me or I'm John Smith on down the street.

Ben: What has been the company's responses to the more aggressive stance that women are taking?

Sharon: Well, there again, I think in the beginning of my activities, it was about the same for them as it was the membership. It's okay for you to do that in an office, and I mostly work with female people. I think there again they have that

same attitude, that uh, that's okay, let her handle it, for those women in that work group, you know. And that was the extent of it. But then again, I don't believe that, not only myself, but I don't believe any of the women who are active had the respect of the company that we have today. Attitudes have changed a lot. I think they have a long way to go. But I think they've definitely changed. Even in the last 10 years.

Ben: I understand that your husband, Jim Trimble, is an active union member, also. (yes, he is)

Sharon: Uh, Jim has been steward for many, many years, 18 years probably. He held the office of vice-president of our local, which is an elected office. He has bargained a contract for us, uh, a 1979 contract. He was on the bargaining council. He's been very active all those years.

Ben: Do you feel that your acceptance has in any way been enhanced by being his wife?

Sharon: Mmm-hmm, yes. Uh, yes, I do. Jim is well-liked; he is respected. He is known for saying his beliefs outright, whether it's what you want to hear, or whether it isn't. If it's right, it's right; if it's wrong, it's wrong. And he's been known for that. Uh, I guess I kind of adopted that attitude, but it works well. You can't make everybody happy all the time. It's sad, but it's true. And he is respected. By a lot of people. Uh, both on the company's side and the union's side. However, there are people on the other hand who don't want to hear that, you know. We get in the situation where if you don't tell me the answer I want to hear, I don't want to hear it. So you get into that, too. But yes, I feel like that probably because he has been so active, and they know that we are strong believers in what we're doing, that yes, my position has probably been enhanced due to his activities. I don't know if I would be where I am today had it not been for him, and what he's done. Kind of like waggin' our shirrtails.

Ben: Do you feel the future holds an elected position for you? Would you pursue that, or even want it?

Sharon: Well, I have thought about it. In fact, Jim and I were discussing that last night. I feel...our local will be facing an election in about a year and a half, and he and I have both talked about it. Yes, I might consider it. Whether or not, I would consider running for [inaudible]...I can't say. Uh...not that I have reservations about being able to do the job. But if and when I would ever decide to do it, I would want to know that I would be effective. Really effective in what I was doing. So, maybe sometime in the future, yes, but right now, I can't say yes or no. Probably I would, though. If the opportunity were right. If it was the right time. Whether I would be elected or not, remains to be seen, but I might consider it, seriously.



Ben: Has the local union had any elected officers that were female in the past?

Sharon: Oh, yes, we have two serving now. We have 5 officers. Uh...three right now are male, and two are female. So we're pretty liberated. Of course, labor is for equality. It would be a strange situation if your local was prejudiced that they wouldn't elect a woman to an office.

Ben: What do you feel the most difficult part of your job is?

Sharon: Interpretation of the contract, I would think. Uh...for example, people being people tend to want to hear what they want to hear. That contract is written and signed by both parties. The union must abide by that contract, just the same as, the same as the company has to abide by that contract. The thing I find most difficult is when people say to me, this only says this. When it explicitly refers you to other passages or articles and they don't want to go into that. You know, it's like a series of circumstances like if that applies, if this applies, if this applies, then you've got to do such and such. Uh, members can through inexperience, and through \_\_\_\_\_ who want to only read what they want to read, and in the manner they want to apply it. And it's very difficult to have to look at someone and say, you're wrong, you don't have a grievance. That I think is the most difficult part of a steward's job, or any officer. They fail to realize that the union is bound by state and federal laws, that there are things that we can do and cannot do. They have no understanding in generally speaking, of labor laws, which is very, very difficult and very [inaudible].... And I really would have to say that probably is it in a nutshell. It's very difficult to have to go by the rules, because they apply it to both sides and people [inaudible]....

Ben: Does the union provide union training or educational opportunities for the members to...so that they can become more familiar with labor laws and contracts and subsequently open up opportunities for them to become more active in the leadership of the union?

Sharon: Yes, many, many opportunities are there for the asking, if they want to take the time to be interested in it. The University of Kentucky has a complete center for labor education and research. We call it CLEAR. They come to Ashland, they're located on the main campus in Lexington, they come to Ashland very, very often with classes. And basic things like how to file a grievance, what you do to protect that grievance uh, from the very beginning of a grievance situation on into bargaining, labor law, anything like that, our local has always had a policy, that if someone, these classes are taught by people from the CLEAR staff. They're \_\_\_\_\_ they're educated, they're well-versed. And obviously they really....

END OF SIDE 1

Sharon: Okay, as I said, labor law has to play a very important part in any local today. I just can't stress it enough that the training on labor law for people who are really, really active or want to get active is just imperative. Our local has always had the policy that any time there is a CLEAR class offered here in the Ashland area, and they will come for the asking if all we have to do is provide them with 8 or 10 names, whatever. And they will come and have a class for anyone interested. We have a state director who will come and conduct classes. Obviously, people like Jim, people like myself, who have lived through many contracts, know a lot about contract regulations. And any answer that we can provide is there for the asking. We have people, we have lawyers, we have from Ashland, Kentucky all the way through to Birmingham, Alabama, to Washington, D.C. There is someone somewhere who can answer your question. All you have to do is ask it.

Ben: How expansive is the General Telephone system?

Sharon: Nationwide? Uh, it's worldwide, it's worldwide now. Uh, are you talking about people, number of employees? That kind of thing?

Ben: I was just wondering if it was localized to just a specific area.

Sharon: No, it is a worldwide corporation. Very large. I think we're about 3rd in the nation.

Ben: Do you know where the funding for the Center for Labor Education & Research comes from?

Sharon: [inaudible]...maybe I do. I forgot. Let's see if I've got anything in here from CLEAR. I wanted to say, I think it's through a grant, I mean, through a university, but I'm not really sure. Gosh, I've got so much stuff [inaudible]...I really think it's from funding from...uh, some university. You know, how it's distributed, I can't really say for sure. But it's actually a branch, you know of a university.

Ben: But the union would support it through their payment of people who attend the classes?

Sharon: Always, certainly, yes. Yeah, definitely. They kind of operate as a non-profit educational kind of situation. Obviously, they have to be paid, the employees who work for CLEAR. Obviously there are expenses involved when they come and hold a class, they bring supplies, they bring you everything you need to work with during the class. So I'm sure the fees that we pay back, reimbursement supplies and that kind of thing, they may even get funding from the Department of Labor. You know, it's possible they get things from that. They work closely with them at times. So, it could be from there, too.

Ben: I think that closes out my questionnaire. Any specific

comments that you'd like to make about women's involvement in the union structure?

Sharon: Well, probably nothing that I haven't already covered, other than I think women have played a very important part in labor history. I think they will continue to play an even more important part. I think they will continue to play an even more important part. Obviously, we are having women elected to government positions uh, we're having women appointed to government committees. Women are not sitting home any more on the back porch. They don't want to. They have a lot to give, and they want to give it. Not only for their own benefit, but the benefit of everyone that they can [inaudible].... Uh, it's been a long, hard road and I'm sure it's not over yet. Especially in our industry. I think that uh, on a nationwide basis and in the next 15 years, you'll see a big difference with women in the labor movement. More so than maybe in the past 15 [coughs], the J. P. Stevens situation, [inaudible]... they've been on our list for so long. They had pretty much become resolved, that whole situation. They were beginning to treat their employees like employees. They were beginning to recognize human rights. And out of all the employees involved in the J.P. Stevens situation, throughout the south, I would have to say that had it not been for the women, they probably wouldn't be around today.

Ben: You're referring to the J.P. Stevens textile manufacturing?

Sharon: Obviously, those type of jobs were there again uh, classic women's jobs, sewing, weaving, that kind of thing. And if those women hadn't fought for what they believed in, and what they deserved, that company would still be on our boycott list today. And they have been removed. It's took a lot of work, a lot of [inaudible]...a lot of equal opportunity suits, a lot of class action suits to get them where they are now. But with the help of their union and the help of the women involved, not that they men didn't help, I don't mean that, but the women, there were more women in those jobs than there were men. They have resolved those issues in all but a few of their plants. And I'm sure that they will be coming shortly. Or that corporation will probably be out of business. One or the other.

Ben: Well, thank you for an informative interview.

Sharon: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW