

Title: Interview with Geraldine Defant

Date: March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1990

Location: Marquette, Michigan

Marquette County Commissioner

#### START OF INTERVIEW

Jennifer Grondin (JG): Testing 1, 2, 3. The date is March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1990. I am interviewing Ms. Geraldine Defant. She's a Marquette County commissioner. The interviewer is Jennifer Grondin, we reside in Marquette, Michigan. Gerry, could you tell me about your family history?

Geraldine Defant (GD): Yes. I was born and raised in Chicago and I was the youngest of a family of six. I graduated high school in 1933 and if you remember your, our American history that was the depth of the depression and the depression in a city was a pretty devastating experience, especially for adolescents. In high school, I remember participating in a strike to support our teachers because they were being paid with script by the Chicago Board of Education rather than in cash. The board was out of money and the script hopefully was to be used in lieu of salary. I had, probably because of the familiarity through the family, been interested in social change and the word "socialism" was not a strange one to me, and in terms of my reading and in terms of my observation of what was going on in the country and the world, I started with a political orientation and as a critical observer and later participant in what was going on.

JG: How about your family background kind of developing interest? Were your parents political?

GD: Well, my mother was a, came over from first Lithuania to England and was a cap maker in a cap making factory when she was ten years old. She did piece work and was a child worker. She worked seven days a week and ten hours a day. She was political and had political background when she came to this country. She again, went into the cap making factory and there was a union there that she helped to organize so that she had a union orientation. My older brother, one who was closest to me in years, six years of my senior, he too was interested in political change

and in social change, so that there was talk and books around the house involving musicians and I picked them up and knew it without a doubt, there was an influence on me.

JG: It's fascinating. Really it's fascinating.

GD: Well, were anybody as I say who had their eyes opened, it was impossible not to be aware of the fact that our society was crumbling. The front pages of the newspapers every week, it seems to me, had a display of a family sitting on the street in their sofa around tables and chairs, they had been dispossessed, and here in the wintertime, they were hovering in the cold around their few positions because they had been unable to pay the rent and the sheriff had dispossessed them. There was talk about in some neighbors, neighborhoods a workers' alliance it was called, where spontaneously neighbors used to get together, and when somebody was evicted, they would wait until the sheriff had gone and then go around the back and break open in the door and bring the furniture back in the house and the family, then it would take them at least another 24 hours or possibly longer before the sheriff was able to evict them again. Well, when you're living within a society where this happens, you can't not be knowledgeable. I had a job on Saturday when I was going to school and if I remember rightly was in Austin, which is a suburb of Chicago, and it used to cost me two car fares to get there and I used to have to work a 12 hour day and I used to be paid a dollar a day. So by the time I took my car fares out, of course I carried a sack lunch, I think I came out of it with seventy five cents a day for a day's work. So this was something you lived, you saw people on the street in the popular characterization is the veteran selling apples. Well, there was this and there were breadlines and as I say, it would be the rare person who was not conscious of what was going on, that our society was crumbling.

JG: After high school, what path did you take?

GD: After high school, I went to college nights and attempted to get a job days and was fortunate to get employment with the Chicago Relief Administration. I did clerical work because I had no training, but again, I was working in a relief office where clients came in and where I was working with case histories involving and describing how people were living and I was completely immersed in the symptoms of a crumbling economy. I was active and made myself active in helping to organize the union at the CRA, the Chicago Relief Administration, and was an active member of that union and that was the first time I took an active role myself. Sometime those few years, my brother had become a lawyer and he worked for a labor law firm. And I

volunteered to take time off from my job to help the situation, I remember most vividly was the taxi cab driver strike in Chicago and -

JG: What year was that?

GD: This was probably '35 or '36, just about that time. And what happened was one day, a group of about a hundred cap drivers came into the lawyer's office and said "we're on strike, we help us organize a union?" And that's not untypical of what would happen those days, people didn't know, there was no organizing per say conditions or wages or a combination of the two became so unbearable that they caught the bug of union organizing and we want to join the CIO of course, because the CIO, was the Congress of Industrial Organizations, was the new union which was taking in unskilled and groups of workers other than craft unions, the American Federation of Labor, the AF of L, was built upon a craft union construct, so that it was the CIO that was taking in anyone or everyone who chose to become affiliated. So I took time off and my job was to man the or person - (laughs) in those days it was bad - the telephone bank at night so that if a driver were picked up, the report would be made that he was picked up and what station he had been taken to. So that then I could institute a bond securing procedure to get him out of jail. And of course the police became aware that we had an apparatus for this, so they would change and move the strikers from precinct to precinct and there are hundreds of precincts in the city, and if you don't know what precinct they're in and if they're not and, they're booked in a specific precinct then of course you couldn't take measures to get them out of jail. So there, we had people watching each precinct as much as we could and then a feedback set up where by we could keep tab on who was being arrested and where indeed they were, so we could start to get them out. That was very exciting.

JG: So interesting. And so when you work finished there with your...

GD: When the strike finished, uh... I worked for the CRA until I went to California with my parents. They had relatives there. And on the way we had a car accident and my parents were injured, not seriously it turned out, but they were injured, and I stayed in Oklahoma to take care of a car and the other people who were there and then finally follow them to Los Angeles. That was pretty much of a trauma to me and I've almost thought that I went back to Chicago because the trauma interfered with my making adjustment in California and I went back to Chicago and got married very quickly and lived in Chicago and proceeded to get work and go to school at

nights and this was a very touchy thing and oh, I had a number of jobs, none of which interested me particularly until I heard about an opening with the garment workers union, and I applied and I was hired. All of this time, I was active in union organization movements throughout the city when there was picket line, people were called to come and support and I would respond as much as I was able in terms of my working responsibilities.

JG: Were you also affiliated with any particular political party at this time?

GD: No, I regarded myself as a socialist, and I was never a member, membership type but I would go to socialist meetings when famous speakers came in. I remember there was a big debate between Norman Thomas, who was chair of the National Socialist Party, and Earl Browder, who was chair of the National Communist Party, and this was quite a debate and of course I was there and was stimulated by all of it.

JG: So did you organize, when you took the job with the garment workers in Chicago, did you do some organizing there?

GD: Yes, yes. My job was organizer and not in Chicago but in Indiana, I worked for the... what was it called? The out of city division and it was my job to attempt to organize the runaway shops or the shops that had never been organized and uh... I proceeded to do that.

JG: How long was it before you came to the Upper Peninsula then?

GD: My organizing career lasted about three years and it developed from straight organizing to my being a business agent, in which I would have a group of local unions and representing local factories under my jurisdiction and I would train the workers in collective bargaining in Griven's procedure techniques, I would speak before the meetings on what was happening in the country and economic news and political news, and I did, I would say at the end I was doing about 90 percent Griven's and contract negotiations as well, I was able to start with small firms and I was working my way into a more larger section of the industry. So that's what I was doing at the time I was called in the office and said, the firm, uh, the H.W. Gossard company had two plants in Indiana that I serviced as a business agent, and they had an open shop in Ishpeming, Michigan. There had been three or four efforts to organize the Ishpeming shop and none of them successful. And they thought it was my time to take a crack at it. Well, I'd never heard of Ishpeming and I, nor the Upper Peninsula, I had once been asked to go up and make the speech in New London,

Wisconsin, and I thought that was the edge of the country, you know, and to find that there was a whole peninsula above that was unbelievable. But it was just my time to take a crack at it.

JG: And so up you came.

GD: Yes. I had a familiarity not only with the corset, brassiere, and girdle industry which was what it was, but I had a familiarity with the company because I had been servicing the Logansport Plant in particular. There was another plant, a brassiere plant, and I can't remember where it was, that was small plant in Indiana, but the Logansport Plant was the big one. And the company had gone from a system of money on their piece work where, let's say an hour's work was worth... seventy five cents and they gave you a task, a bundle, and if it took you an hour you clipped off the ticket and you had earned seventy-five cents or as much as it took you to do it, length of time. In the union shop, it was obvious to us, as a matter of fact it was a \_\_\_\_\_ conclusion that the company was using the changeover from a money system to a point system where an hour was divided into minutes and that the workers' bundles were priced in minutes or points rather than pennies, and the company had used this opportunity to change prices, those that they perceived were high or loose, they changed and lowered and some operations they cut in half and organized it differently in an effort to bring the prices down to a level that they were willing to pay. In the union shop, of course this created a burden and a whole procedure of grievances and time studies, both by the company and by the union, of what it actually, how many minutes it actually took to do this operation, and then negotiating, bargaining with the plant manager on the final payment. We knew then that if they were doing this in the union shop, that all hell must be breaking loose in the Northern shop which was while it was timely to attempt to organize then. We also had a, one or two, especially one woman, in the plant who had been a union contact and she gave us information from inside, and indeed that's exactly what was going on.

JG: Do you remember her name?

GD: Ruth Crane (??)

JG: Ruth Crane (??)

GD: Yes, Ruth Crane, from Ishpeming. And Ruth was a good conduit for information for us. So I came up here and... we had, I think I brought up two organizers with me and we organized by

going from home to home and attempting to get people who were friendly, if possible, to get a few workers from that department together and to visit them and to talk about the advantage of working in the union shop and to get union cards signed. And this procedure went on for a period of three-four months, and with the growth dissatisfaction in the plant over the piece work change, we were able to secure over a majority of membership cards and we called for an NLRB election. We had the election and we won the election, I don't remember the percentage but it was well over the 50 percent, so the challenges that come after these things inevitable, were not meaningful. At that time, I looked around the community for an attorney to represent us in our dealings with the NLRB there were some technicalities, and standard procedure was to have an attorney represent us and I went to the steel workers who were organized and said, "who do you have?" and "who do you recommend?" And organized labor in Ishpeming was really the steel workers in Ishpeming and Negaunee, and they recommended Michael Defant who was doing the union, who was known as the union lawyer in the community, and that's how I met my husband-to-be, and we won the election and then proceeded to bargain with the company. The company's seat, corporation seat, was in Chicago. And actually the top company officials were well known to the union top company officials because they had been negotiating over the southern plants for years then, and there had been relationships built up. It was then that negotiations started and 90 percent of negotiations were held in Chicago because the parties to the matter were there and when it looked as though there was going to be, things were coming to a head, a committee would come in from Ishpeming and I would bring that committee to Chicago to confer or to give tentative reaction to a settlement. The company was adamant they had held out the Ishpeming plant as an experimental plant to try things that, in their perception, they couldn't do as easily in a union plant, to try out new methodology, to try out lower rates, then they would make the similar garment in the union plant and used the rates in the non-union plant as an example and the production levels as a bargaining point, leverage really. So the negotiating started, the company refused to give us a union contract whereby all the members, all the workers in the plant, would be members of the union, that was called not a closed shop but very close to the closed shop. The company in a closed shop, the union hires, in a union shop the company hires, there's a probationary period, I think there it was perhaps three or six months after that when the worker was to be made a permanent employee, it was an incumbent, it was compulsory for that worker to join the union. And we were asking, we had that arrangement in the two Indiana shops

and we wanted that arrangement there as well, especially since there was a small, very local anti-union group in the Ishpeming shop that caused concern. There was, they hadn't accepted their defeat in the election graciously, and through experience we knew the company would use them as favorites and there would be constant friction and dissension in the shop, and we felt in order for this to be a productive relationship with the company, it had to be a union shop, for the workers to feel that these in quote "non-union" or "anti-union" people were getting the same benefits as the union because they would be, and yet they would be playing a company role rather than cooperating with their fellow workers, this was regarded as unfair and unsound and as a sore point which would not go away and it was our experience that was exactly what happened. So that it was very important that a union shop be part of the contract. Then the company, I think either made a mistake or were persuaded by the local manager who was vehemently anti-union, and incidentally there was the union in Ishpeming, the large plant, there was also a small brassiere plant in Gwinn which was non-union as well. And whether the company miscalculated and felt that they wanted to continue to use this plant as leverage against the lower Indiana plants, they would not give us the standard contract that prevailed in Indiana. They offered a, I think a three cent raise and other benefits that did not come up to the standard of the other contracts. And negotiating proceeded for three-four months with no progress being made, and as I say, looking back at it with perspective, these were not people who should have been suspicious of one another, they had worked together for years, whether the company's profits at that time we were not imperiled, the industry as we knew it, and we knew the whole industry, was doing rather well, we saw no reason why the company could not make a pact with us based upon the standard in their other shops. Now, there is always a way to compromise and the IOG has never had a history of being a recalcitrant partner at the bargaining table. They could, if they had even said over a period of years, "we will make up this difference," but they were, the company was adamant, neither the union shop which gave the union security that they would not be a minority of management and workers both eating away at our security, plus a wage differential with the other shops which would continue to make our own members dissatisfied at what we were able to bring them made us feel that this was just untenable. We negotiated for months and used the strike threat thinking even to the last minute that the company would finally come to, uh, we offered arbitration, we offered... We knew that it was going to an expensive strike. And the international did not want to lightly go into a strike of 500 people without making every effort to

settle it. It was not to be settled. What happened inside the company I can only guess. We went out on strike, I believe, in March.

JG: What year was this?

GD: I've got to check my records...I think it was '50.

JG: 1950.

GD: No...wait a minute. Yes, no it was '60. [Long pause.] No, '55. I would say '55. I'll check that year for you, I have some clippings above and I'll give you the year because you will want that to be accurate. We went out on strike and the international union did follow its policy and its commitment to be, and to the staff into the workers, of full support. And they had been most reluctant to ok a full strike, because they knew what it meant. And the staff knew what it meant what it meant was a paycheck of, from 10 to 15 dollars a week to each striking worker for every week and which they were on strike.

JG: And there were five hundred workers in it?

GD: Yes.

JG: That's a lot!

GD: A lot of money. It meant a kitchen which would provide three meals a day, five days a week to every striker in their family. It meant setting up an emergency fund for such things, there was no medical insurance those days for medical emergencies or emergencies of various kind and then it meant the staff to overhead, to manage all this. It was a very costly strike. We hired a hall and we set up the kitchen committee who did the shopping and who did the cooking and who did the serving and we had picket captains and shifts throughout the day, throughout the night and we had entertainment, too, because man does not live by bread alone as we know, and I would bring in amateur entertainment that, I'd try to do that once a week, would have classes for the membership and hygiene, how to fix your hair, sewing, current events, whatever we could find interest, where we could find some interest, we would set up these classes to provide and alternative activity for the, for our members. It was a very tough period, the men who had so supported their family got the higher rate of 15 dollars a week, the woman who had someone else



working in the family got the lower rate of 10 dollars unless they were sole support of their family or self-supporting, in which case they got the higher amount.

JG: I didn't realize that there were men working in the garment factories.

GD: Yes. There, the cutters and mechanics were the two departments that were staffed by men. All the other operations were held by women. I would say there were approximately 75 to 80 men in the plant and the remainder were women. We had on strike, participating, and the union hall 80 percent of the workers of a plant. In another words, after we went on strike, we didn't win the election by 80 percent, but we continued to visit and attempt to persuade and convince people to come along with the union and a lot of them did. And some of them did, I'm sure, in order to get benefit of the relief and the other benefits provided and the others... of course, it was a combination then they were convinced then that this was the way they should go. The company made an effort to keep the plant open with the non-union workers and there were tussles on the picket line the first week. I would say, after that, it dwindled, the company closed the plant and no longer made any effort to operate. The wind plant did operate, however, fully. Were you asking something?

JG: I was going to say when you mention that there were tussles, I wanted to clarify that was there some violence between them?

GD: Not violence. Pushing, name calling, uh, that sort of thing was what it amounted to, I don't remember anything else. I remember people leaning out from the second and third story windows and calling names and the workers clustering and walking in semi-circle around the entrances calling names back and that sort of thing. The picketers had signs and the remarks exchanged, we were not well meant or were not kindly ones.

JG: So there's a great deal of animosity.

GD: A great deal of animosity and \_\_\_\_\_ and feelings were, tempers rode very high. We kept the picket line on 24 hours a day, even though we knew there was no manufacturing because we also knew through our male, through the members how much work there was in the plant, and we were concerned that the company would attempt to take some of the cut work out and take it to other plants either to Gwinn to be completed or to subcontract it to other courseet manufactures in the Middle West who would then finish the product and so that the company

could continue to fill its orders, or at the minimum complete the orders that we were already in process. This was very common in the garment industry incidentally, farming out or subcontracting out work to other manufacturers, so that when you know the industry, you know what to look out for. We found, sure enough, we found Herald Peterson with his car full of cut bundles and this he was, these were all brassiere and brassiere pieces and brassiere bundles that were on their way to Gwinn, we were sure, because the shop was operating. So we put a picket line around the Gwinn plant. We had made no effort to organize the plant, thinking that it was enough to handle the big plant in Marquette and since all the cutting for Gwinn was done in Marquette and all of the final shipping was done here if the not Marquette, I'm sorry, Ishpeming. If the Ishpeming plant were organized, it would be very logical and easy to organize the Gwinn plant, but that was not to be at the time. The company proceeded to bring the cut work to Gwinn and to keep the Gwinn plant working, the Gwinn plant would have closed down. When it finished, they cut work that was already there because all of the cutting was done in Ishpeming, there's no cutting done in Gwinn. So that they would have run out of work as a normal consequence of completing the work in progress, but new work was being brought into that plant. So it was the decision of the local that if a company keep bringing in new work, the union would have to follow the work. And we set up a picket line in the mornings and at night when new workers came in and we had a bevy of cars and would go down there at six o'clock in the morning, I think the plant opened at seven, and we had up to 100, 150 strikers from Ishpeming. There was a relationship between the Gwinn and the Ishpeming people. Most Gwinn people either knew people in Ishpeming or had relatives or the other way around. In addition, the steel workers, and the steel workers were a union, they, and they were the husbands and fathers and brothers of the Gwinn women and they were all union members, and I'm sure that they got pressure in the mines, at working on what was called scab work, so there was dissatisfaction and tension within the Gwinn plant. We became aware of it and indeed, in the Gwinn community. The Gwinn community looked at that plant as the only place for women to work and it was primarily and they felt the picket line coming down from Ishpeming was threatening their, uh, the one industrial plant in the community. And I can remember going down there the evening before with some other folk. The evening before we were setting up the picket line and seeing people talking on corners and I could get the gist of what was going on, we've got these outsiders out of here and we can't permit them to close down the only place our sisters and

daughters have to work and there was a feeling growing of anger and resentment and bitterness. Later we found that the township had hired additional police, I think they had one or two local police on duty, but they put another half of dozen on to as a precaution and the next morning, when we came at six o'clock or thereabouts we found of a plant was ringed with hundreds of people, local Gwinn people waiting for us to come, and it was also very obvious that they were not there to welcome us that they were hostile and angry, and we formed our circle around the plant and the women proceeded to sing the union songs that they always sang to bolster their courage and give them a feeling of camaraderie, and it would always seem to do that. And it was tense and I...

JG: Let's pause for just a moment while I flip the tapes.

[TAPE CHANGE]

GD: The crowd that was surrounding the plant, the Gwinn plant, were not only police. I doubt that there were more than 6-7 deputies, possibly, it doesn't, I don't know. But these were community people, these were men, primarily, in the community who were businessmen and others that were upset and hostile and who were going to try to chase away and frighten the strikers. So I was watching from going from one group to another of the strikers as well as keeping an eye on the community group and trying to judge what danger there might be there, when suddenly, there were two doors and I was at one, I could see the other door a car left the street, careened over the curve and made for the picket line, and she ran into the picket line, and I could just see women being mowed down. And I ran together with the whole line over to see what had happened and that's exactly what happened, a woman driver had deliberately run into the line whether it was a, she was anti-union we later found, whether it was an effort to frightened the picketers and then she thought she could get out of it, or whether she lost her head and deliberately meant to do bodily harm and run into them, I don't know, I don't know. The courts later gave her suspended sentence so they have their own determination of what happened. But I ran into, the doctor's office was in an adjacent building, and I ran in there and got the doctor and he called the ambulance from Marquette, it had to come all the way out from Marquette to Gwinn which is 35 miles. And in the meantime, we were trying to minister as well as we could and it wasn't very, very well to assist the local doctor in checking them out.

JG: What kind of interest that they had from the...?

GD: There were about eight women who were injured and everywhere from broken bones to, uh, usually broken bones or lacerations from being thrown to the ground and being dragged. And two ambulances came out, as I remember, and I rode in the ambulance with one group and... it was a shocking, shocking thing, and the strange thing is when you see a mob, I've read about this but never experienced it, you can almost smell the hatred and hysteria in the air. There's an anger and an energy and a panic almost, hysteria is probably better word, in the air, that is almost palpable and it's a frightening phenomenon, scared the hell out of me. And at the time that this happened, I was really looking for a way of pulling the picket line there to protect them, because I was afraid, we had no recourse to protect ourselves, the only thing we could do is get the heck out of there, and I kept watching the time and, because we would picket until the plant was, let's see, people come to work from 7 to 8 and we would picket from 7 to 8 and then go, and I was thinking, this is about quarter to eight, thinking well, maybe I'm gonna pull it early this morning when this happened. And, emotionally, this shook all of us, I think it shook the whole county. Here were group of people who were not hurting anyone, who were not even berating the Gwinn people, they were attempted to persuade, they were, a typical exchange would be "join us, your husbands and relatives are union people, let us all the union people together" and there was no viciousness or antagonism, they weren't regarded as being strike breakers because we had not put that plant on strike, so we didn't regard them strike breakers, they are doing but they always done and felt pretty uncomfortable in doing it, I know. There were instances that came back to us of people who just took sick leave or had family problem and didn't come into work for two weeks because they felt uncomfortable at working during a strike, even though the strike was at Ishpeming and they were not involved, so there was no animosity as far as we were concerned at all. It was just, we wanted to make them aware that it was, the company was taking our work to Gwinn, that they should join our union that they were our brothers and sisters and the union would be one union for both plants. So I think the community was shocked and appalled by the violence which not that, we had not started which had been started by the hysteria of the anti-union group of the community. We had a... I remember during, at the Ishpeming plant prior to the Gwinn tragedy, incidentally no one was killed but there are women to this day who have a bad ankle or bad knee which they trace to the breakage and that occurrence.

JG: So there are some women that are still in the Gwinn area?

GD: Yes. Yes. Yes. We would stop cars coming out of the Ishpeming garage and the men would look at what was in the car and... I'm thinking of, you know, what violence \_\_\_\_\_ quote, had we been had we been involved with, and I think the closest to it was that the cars were stopped and we asked to look in the cars, or the picketers did and half of dozen strikers were put in jail for interfering with the free access of the car from the plant, in and out of the plant. And Michael Defant, my husband, of course, represented them and he... was there, he was, we put him on retainer to represent us when we needed him. So that he had access to the legal community and the judiciary community and the business community, none of which I was that familiar with, and they gave us a knowledgeable appraisal, he provided of what we were up against in the community. The strike, there was a...oh, after the first week of the strike in Ishpeming, there was no attempt made to go back to work by the non-union people or the anti-union people or the supervisors. The doors were locked and no one but Herald Peterson, who was plant foreman, plant superintendent, had access. But the community, the business community attempted to put pressure on the political apparatus to break the strike. The rotary, well I shouldn't say the rotary because I don't remember the organizations, I'd have to go back to the clippings, but a half of dozen of the local social and fraternal and service organizations in Ishpeming organized together, led by Sam Cohodas, and went to an Ishpeming City Council meeting at which they spoke and asked that the city council issue a proclamation condemning the strike and asking the governor to send in troops to reopen the plant and permit the people to go back to work. The Ishpeming Council was representative of the people in the community and they refused to take this action. [laughs] That's all, it was a nice one to remember. Right after the occurrence in Gwinn, I organized a countywide meeting, and I remember was at the Gwinn in the Ishpeming park. Perhaps it was like Quaal Park, I don't remember. But I had the three mayors of Ishpeming, Negaunee, and Marquette as speakers, and they were all pro-union.

JG: Do you remember their names?

GD: No, I don't. I, again, they're in the clippings and I have it available to you. But we had the steel workers, a district manager who was one of the speakers, I was one of the speaker, Michael Defant, our attorney, was one of the speakers, and we attracted...I don't know. There was talk about a thousand people being there, I don't know the number, I made no estimate other than people were sitting in the park or they were in cars surrounding the podium. But it was a

tremendous outpouring people from Marquette, largely, Ishpeming and Negaunee, but the city Marquette labor was well represented, the building trade were well represented there. I remember them coming up to us afterwards and saying “do you have emergency relief fund and can we chip in” and of course we had, and welcomed it, and so the building trades and the steel workers and the iron workers and all of them that chose made donations to this fund from which we made emergency grants as needed. So it was, I think the credibility of the company was destroyed by the Gwinn episode.

JG: Did it kind of turn the tide then?

GD: It's sort of turned the tide, yes, yes. Marquette County was not an anti-union community, the steel workers had gone through a big strike shortly after they had been organized. The building trades were well organized by Marquette, as I say the three mayors of the three towns had either a union background or had alliances with union or constituents so that they had taken positions supporting the strike. So there was heavy support for us among the citizenry. The business community, that was not the case. The business community felt, I'm sure, of the lack of patronage, people weren't buying in their stores, people were, had pulled in their belts to survive the strike, as always happens, and they found their revenue was cut back. So they reacted by, you know, “the strike is wrong.” And that's the type of short sighted thinking, the fact that, if we won the strike we would have a, for all time an augmented a paycheck and could spend more in the stores, that of course was not, was not a... Incidentally, the organizations did go to the governor and asked for intervention even without the city commission or city council approval and Soapy Williams was governor of the state then, and somehow he did not respond. [Both laugh] I had had no great fear at that time, but the state police did not come close to us. Another, oh, little vignette, perhaps, that make these experiences come alive for me... I can remember some of the young women and how, what they did to entertain themselves, and they would come, not all of them, but some of them would come to the picket line dressed in a costume and they would entertain themselves that way or on a special holiday they put on, in our union hall, they put on a mock wedding at dressed up in, you know, bride and groom and the whole bit and had a local choral group accompany the, and had tried to have as much fun and make use of the camaraderie that they had established. Another observation during a period of crisis that you find in a war, in a natural tragedy of some type, and in a strike, uh, people who were very ordinary people are

capable of the most heroic actions that you would conceive and I saw it again and again and again, unremarkable people who suddenly were capable of doing very remarkable things, of heroism and caring for their neighbor and throwing aside their own need to protect themselves, and running in front of the car and group just crying and begging “how can I help, how can I help” and taking off their jackets and putting them under the heads of the women who had been knocked down, and just loving and caring and self-sacrifice, not only in that incident, but you were dealing with that many people and they are going to be problems, people have problems, they’ll have child who’s ill and not have the money for the doctor or for the medicine and people volunteering to go over and chipping in out of their straight benefits for the medicine and whatever the family needed and I, this happen many, many years ago and I still carry with me a wonderment at the heroism that people are capable of and how wonderful they can be and are when they needed and when they’re called upon.

JG: Oh, that’s incredible. How long did the...

GD: The strike take? Three months.

JG: Three months? And how was it eventually resolved?

GD: It was eventually resolved with a compromise. We got the union contract, which meant after the probationary period, everyone joined the union. I think what we did was to give them a longer probationary period that in the other plants, I think it was three months in the other plants, and here they were given six months to decide whether they were going to, you know, keep that work or not, but once they were accepted as permanent, it was compulsory union. The increase was not high, if I remember it was roughly five cents and ten cents an hour to the hourly workers. But knowing the industry, the union, in a strategy session, decided - oh, incidentally, the rest of the contract was in accordance with the standard of the other plants. But in terms of wages, we decided that we could afford to take a smaller increase. The union pledged, and I pledged because I was going to service that plant, that we would provide a responsive and adequate grievance service where we would train in every department piece workers where we would train a time, - uh, time, time, what’s the word I’m searching for? Time study person who could recheck the company’s figures and what we did get was a recognition that the, a department average should be... and I don’t remember whether it’s dollar on hour or what the figure was. But we knew that if we gave them the kind of service we’re pledging to do, we

would complain at every blessed rate with time study, every rate that seemed faulty, we had a frame of reference because we could check the yield on it with the yield in the southern plants and we knew that give us a year, we could raise the earnings in that plant and we did by 25 percent.

JG: Wow, wow, oh, that's tremendous.

GD: So, when I recommended that contract, I had to know in my gut that we could deliver, but I knew it. My background in working with the plant in Logansport, I could tell and show what had happened. Incidentally, the Logansport shop just happened to have labor dispute and went out on a walkout. Now it was illegal for them to have a sympathy strike with Ishpeming, but they found a way [laughs] of being very uncooperative in Logansport. So these pressures were placed upon the company as well. The end of the story, really, is the productivity of the plant went up, the self-respective workers went up immeasurably. Because every little department, the single needle department, the double needle, the binding, the inspectors, every department had their steward and their steward got to know the prices, if she was unsure of what the price should be, she would call in the union, the top steward who we had trained to do a time and motion study, so that we would know whether we were being given a, you know, a story and, which we'd have to live with and if you put all your bargaining power behind a complaint and then had the operator run away with that price and have that price produce two dollars an hour, we would never hear the end of it. So we had to be sure ourselves that it was within a reasonable range, and the workers...that was tried few times, you know. People are different and different people will having different route. And it was very soon realized that you don't... work against your own self-interest by working against your union steward, you cooperate with union steward, and she can't do a job for you unless you are being up front with her. So the company's productivity increased, their profitability increased and the workers got along very well with management. I must say there was always a little bad feeling with the smaller and smaller group that was characterized as anti-union, but they survived, their job wasn't imperiled, you know, nothing happened to them

JG: Enjoyed union benefits?

GD: They enjoyed the union benefits together with the union and it became a very productive plan. The plant closed.



JG: How long after...?

GD: 15 years.

JG: Oh, so it was the union shop for 15 years?

GD: Yes, and what happened is the women's' movement did them in. [laughs]

JG: There was no longer of market for corsets and brassieres. [both laugh]

GD: Corsets and brassieres and bone girdles were gone with the '60s and '70s. I remember when I was a teenager, my older sister would say, "Now Gerry, you don't go out of the house without a girdle. You are not a lady if you are not wearing a girdle." And, you know, I don't think it would be hard to buy a bone girdle in Marquette County today if you look for one. I don't think there would be one available. This Ishpeming shop as well as brassieres, which were in Gwinn, and girdles, specialized in heavy bone corsets, some of them were so complex that they were used in physical therapy as an adjunct as a prosthetic corset, and others were, the majority of them were part of the fashion. Older women wore corsets and you didn't wear a corset you looked like the devil, until as I say the women's movement came out which says you let it all hang out. And that's what did in the Ishpeming plant, the Logansport plant is still operating and they make brassieres and they have introduced underwear, lingerie, and they do do the kind of a girdle which is unboned which is a two way stretch and it's a girdle panty, I think it's called, but the days of the corsets and the days of the bone girdles, which was the backbone of the Ishpeming industry, did in the plant and they closed.

JG: What a fascinating story!

GD: In addition to that, of course, there was the competition and I shouldn't ignore that because this one just seems more fun so I give it more emphasis, but there was heavy competition in South America, in Mexico and in South America in making garments, non-union garments with no minimum wage rates and that was, uh, the whole industry imported underwear came in at the time because our American firms could not compete. So that together with the style change are what wrote the final chapter to Ishpeming H.W. Gossard Company.

JG: Gerry, thank you so much, this was a fascinating interview. Let's continue a little bit and talk about your family and what you did after.

GD: Well, I was married when I came up here, had no children. My husband taught at Roosevelt University. Michael Defant, our lawyer, and I fell in love. And I divorced my husband and he divorced his wife, neither of us had any children, and we married and I came up here and made my home here and I worked for about a year servicing not only the Gossard plant in Gwinn, which became an union plant, of course, as soon as Ishpeming has settled, but there were plants in Norway, there was lingerie plant and there was a brassiere plant in Escanaba and there was a plant in Negaunee and there was one on the West End so that there was a little industry and I either organized the shops or serviced them in terms of a business agent. And I proceeded to make a home here and we had a family of three children, which are grown adults. But I spent the rest of my life here, and it all came out of my work.

JG: I think certainly the record will show that your commitment to social change didn't end with you leaving the garment workers, that it's continued by all of your activities here.

GD: Yes, yes. I was talking a friend of mine lately and I made the observation that, actually, I didn't think my frame of reference, my frame of reference may have changed, but my basic value system has not changed from that when I was 17, 18. It still is pretty much the same. It's taken different routes, I was a feminist then I believe, and I am certainly feminist now, and have been active, I believed in participatory democracy and I do now, and I have been active in the political arena. I've been a county commissioner for ten years and I've looked for ways in which I could make a change in terms of benefits and the ease of living and support of those groups in our community that need support. So I feel I've been a fairly consistent woman in what I've tried to do.

JG: And a terrific role model, too.

GD: Thank you.

JG: Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW