

Interview with Yvonne Neimi Marquette, MI September 23, 1998

RM: Good afternoon Yvonne could we start the interview with your position at the present time at Northern Michigan University.

YN: At the present time I am principal secretary to in the registrar's office.

RM: Now we would like to get in some of your background. What is your birth date? Where were you born? And how did you come to be employed at Northern Michigan University?

YN: I was born in Negaunee, MI April 2, 1939. I initially started at Northern back in '62-'63 and then I moved to Salt Lake City got a divorce came back to Marquette and started back at Northern in 1970.

RM: So you were here then in the days during the Harden Administration when the place was starting to boom. Maybe some point we could talk about that but not at this time. So then you came back in 1970 and what position did you have at that time?

YN: I was a senior secretary I think in the records office at Northern and from there I worked about a year and a half and went straight into the registrar's office and have been there ever since so it will be 28 years next week.

RM: Now how did from you perception how did the union and also give the exact name of the union and so on. How did the union get started?

YN: Well back in the early 1975 I think it was people became a little disgruntled about some of the things that were going on at Northern. There were some people who were terminated without just cause and they had no recourse there was pay raises that were given that we felt weren't fair there were some inequities that were happening and people became a little disgruntled. And they had been approached I think by several members about talking to several different organizations, union organizations about organizing and so they then called in I think it was the steel workers union (UAW) and I don't know if AXME was involved in the early discussions or not and people decided that was the route they wanted to go. And then I think some time in October '75 they voted and UAW became the international union that was going to represent our local. I think it was in fact October 27, 1975 where we had been officially recognized by merk as being associated with UAW. And that's kind of where we started.

RM: So it was kind of a general decision of dissatisfaction with the situation and that you would say was around '74.

YN: Well between late '74 early '75 when some of those things started happening where people started talking about wanting to become more than just an association which is what we were prior to that point was a recognized association by the university with officers and we had policies, recognized policies but they weren't effective I mean we feel we didn't have the right avenues in order to improve some of the inequities that were happening.

RM: And what was the name of that organization?

YN: It was probably clerical technical association or something similar to that I don't remember. You may want to talk to Ronnie Varney about that because she was president of that association at that time and.

RM: Was she also the person who was kind of the lead person who got the or was one of the lead people who got the union going?

YN: I think yes there was a group of maybe about 20 people who were instrumental in going around and trying to get employees in that time interested in affiliating with some union.

RM: Now what kind of response did you get from What was your response when this first came to you brought to your attention to basically unionize? How did you feel about it? How did other people feel about it?

YN: I think there's always a small margin of people who are apprehensive about affiliating with the union. I think that sometimes unions sound scary to some people. I guess at that point in time I wasn't real pro but certainly decided if that was what the majority of the people that I worked with wanted that I certainly would be supportive and become somewhat active and involved.

RM: So the union gets started in '75 Do you know much about the first contract? Not much just some ideas about the first contract. Where their difficulties negotiating it?

YN: It took awhile but I think that's real normal with your first contract I think that you know you are inexperienced and you probably want a lot and end up settling for less than what you set out to do. I think it took almost a year before they finally got a contract and that it was approved by the board of control.

RM: Now when did you get involved in the leadership of the union.

YN: Once it became we were organized I decided that it was time to have some say in what was going to happen. So I went for trustee. I had that position for three years and then I ran for vice-president and after the first year the president resigned and I have been president ever since. That's been since 1979.

RM: Ok so how many presidents have there been?

YN: Just Mary Knalt and myself.

RM: So Mary started in '75?

YN: I think she maybe started in '76 by the time they elected their first officers. Everything from that first contract was retro to 1975 to 1978 was her first term then in '78 to '81 would have been the second term and then after one year she resigned so that's when I started and took over in '79.

RM: Now was that when she left the English Department?

YN: No she just decided that she didn't want to be that involved anymore. She stepped down from the office.

RM: What were some of your some of the things that you had to face as the union president? Problems things that are rememberable, problems that are rememberable, positive developments that took place.

YN: I think problem that was most rememberable was our strike. That was in 1981, we were the first union to struck. We were only out for three and a half days but we think it had impact on lot of things. We were in the unity building things that are union because lot of the union members became strong, lot of comrade lot took place because of the and lot of people felt that we can make a difference but we have to stand together and do it. I think it was really a turning point for our union.

RM: Now what precipitated the strength?

YN: You might wanna turn it off on this.

RM: Yes, we were talking about the causes of the strike, we have some general ideas give some direction?

YM: I remember money was not an issue I think it became a comparable work issue. Out of that we got some money from the university to put equity trying positions to make more comparable to I think one of the things we worried about at that time was not because we felt our ? worth what they were felt that our jobs were just as valuable making more what they really were to offer I think that was one of the issues that we were fighting for at that time.

RM: So the two the issues were linked to that and vote for the individual, the position and the pay.

YM: Right.

RM: And what was there any kind of pressure during the strike , was there any pressure put on you or attempts to put pressure on you and members so on to give it up?

YM: Well because you know that as a public employee its legal for

us to strike and after three and a half days the university did threaten to terminate our positions if we didn't return back to work. But also in the process they were not willing to continue to talk and meet and try to reach some kind of a compromise which we eventually did but. It got to be an issue of whether or not we were gonna get fired or whether or not we could continue.

RM: Now could the university realistically filled all of the positions and kept operating I mean fired all of the employees and kept operating?

YN: My opinion is no. But you know I mean I guess they could have made life miserable for a few people if they had wanted to do that because my question to the international was ' what would you do' I mean if the university fired us all what would you do and they said well you know they thought that for the most part the university would hire people back but they would hire back selectively if they did that so they probably would hire back those people that they could control and not hire back the people they felt were instigators in this whole process.

RM: So like yourself as president of the union wouldn't be hired back.

YN: It's possible yes.

RM: Were there any Did you feel the How would you now that the union has been around for what some 20-22-23 years or at least the contract has been in place for say 23 years. What are some of the points that you would say were you know positive points of things that have come out of organizing and being organized.

YN: I think having some control or better control over our work environment I mean having some input in what happens in our work environment. I think we have been able to provide some equity for people that was never there before we have been able to provide some job security and some job protection. I mean I don't think there was anything that provides perfection I mean I think there is always someone that is not happy with some piece of what you have done but you try to do the best you can for the majority of the people you represent and you try to improve those things. I think it gives people an avenue in order to process concerns problems without necessarily having to deal with someone on an intimidating basis on a one to one. It gives you someone help fight you have some international power so to speak with regard to legal research statistical. You have somebody with some power with politics may be go out and list it through your legislature or your legislature to look at what happening and what happened during our strike with Jacobetti. So I think that it provides resources to people that they may not generally have.

RM: It this all even the situation where even though you don't use the international facility but it is just the feeling of the membership that this protection, this support, this information

whatever it might be is available to members.

YN: That is right.

RM: And that kind of a sort of a....

YN: A security.

RM: You have more than yourself, your friends, even the union, you have this international body.

YN: That provides you with a real far fetching network of people that you can go out and find out whether or not they had a like situation, I mean we have really made a wonderful network of friends and UAW union in similar colleges and universities. I think you have that kind of ability to do that where as an individual you don't have that even with association accomplish this kind of.... I think that while it is not always perfect. I think that we have been able to do an awful lot of positive things for our membership. Times are tough there have been times when we've had to meet some concessions. We haven't liked it but you sometimes have to way one side versus the other side and determine which in the end is really int he end going to be the best for people. If you can save a few jobs and take a little less money that's worth more than if you loose some people so you can have a higher salary. We've had to make some tough decisions in the past. And I am sure other employees on this campus had to do the same. Everybody was not always been happy with it and criticized by some people for recommending those kinds of things as I said you do the best you can for the majority of the people that you worked with at the time. But it was always not easy.

RM: Now what is the official title of your union?

YN: Well, UAW United Auto Workers. 1950. UAW has several departments the segment we represented by is technical office and professional. they have a aerospace and automobile and what we call a ? department.

RM: Who is encompassed in this union on campus?

YM: Well it is all clerical technical people. I mean there is middle management group the AP group also represent some secretarial type people but it is differentiate by some people supervise and some people don't. If you belong to the AP unit probably you have supervisory responsibility over a clerical person. We represent the secretaries, we have sales people in the book store, mail room workers, AV people we represent the lab tecknitions over in Biology and Chemistry. No we don't have in Physics. we have printing services people, financial services the cashiers, right now we have 198 people in our unit and our unit has maintained somewhat same numbers through the years. When we started out we had 100 or 180 members. We really have not gained a lot and we have not lost either. Right now it does not go below 196, it's

between 196-200. And the biggest change that has happened is rather than all full time positions we have gone to ten month positions, nine month positions. So it provided some flexibility for people who might not need full time jobs, in some respect it is good and sometimes it is not. Because what happened is people who are looking for full time job take up part time job stay there long enough to get some seniority and into a full time job but in some instances children at home between flex time we have done a lot of innovative things, we have tried through the years to accommodate people with children.

RM: Could you talk a little about some of the innovative things that you have done?

YN: Well, with the flex time job share..

RM: Now wait a minute could you explain flex time because person listening here might not know about flex time.

YN: Flex time means that you have core hours job has to be covered say may be eight to five; flex time allows someone to come at seven' clock until o'clock and if someone comes at 9 to six as long as what the university considers core hours are covered.

RM: So that is worked by the individuals in the office or that is worked out by the union?

YN: That is worked out two ways on individual basis and in the summer all divisions on campus are given that flexibility. As long as the core hours are covered. In the academic year some departments then university wants to cover 8-5 we do have people who come in earlier and stay later one on one.

RM: So it is possible for department head ..

YN: Well we did some job share because two people needed one job. A full time coverage. So one person worked from 8 until noon and then the other person worked from 1 until noon it worked with their family schedule that is what they wanted to do.

RM: Are there any other programs like that at Northern?
So those were kind of innovative programs Union came up with. When you got started you had people in your union who subsequently broke off and formed their union? Well Marilyn said that when they had started the union they had faculty of Jacobetti they had about three different groups and these groups broke off so you ended up with three unions instead of one.

YN: ? comes in and initially defines university argues that why should not certain people included in that bargaining. Once that unit is defined they may have people who prior to that unit being defined were considered clerical technical but once the union comes we had people put somewhere else. People like Karen Reese's office one person was excluded. The true definition of being excluded is

confidential you directly involved in contract negotiations but sometimes when you are organizing and trying to establish a unit it is not worth the fight to stop the organizing process because who you going to have and who you not going to have. So sometimes you relate ;that ok you can have this one give us that one sometimes you compromise that is what we did in the early days. If we really had held out there were some people probably would have continued in clerical unit but it was not worth the fight and in early days we had people who did not want to belong to union so they did not. It was against what ever principles they had we had like an agency shop. As long as those people are empolyed by the university they don't ever have to pay union dues but if the positions are filled then those people have to so when we started out I think we had 21 people who were part of our unit but never paid union dues and we got all the benefits from whatever the union negotiated but at the negoations were those people who retired and moved on, people who replaced them then became part of the union

RM: Now did, I know I think the people at AAUP they still have the people paying dues but the money is put into a scholarship or something it's used in some other fashion its not just used for union purposes is that something you do or you just don't charge?

YN: No we don't charge.

RM: And how many are left?

YN: Two

RM: Two people? after all this time? I guess after all this time it would pretty much be built in, Ok is there anything else that you want to add to the interview, something I might have left out, or some comment that you might want to make about the union your involved in.

YN: No I mean I can't really think of anything, as I said we've come a long way, we've made alot of progress I think that we,when I say we I think that the AAUP the union, I think that we have all been instrumental in getting a lot of benefits I think that one group accomplishes something in negotiations sometimes another group will follow on those details and negotiate the same thing so I think that among all of us I think we've you know not done so badly I think we've done fairly well and like I said while we had to give up a few things I think overall Northern isnt such a bad place.

RM: Alright thank you