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**U.16 Long Civil Rights Movement:
The Women's Movement in the South**

Interview U-0485
Marian Groover
25 May 2010

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FIELD NOTES – MARIAN OWNBY GROOVER

(compiled May 26, 2010)

Interviewee: Marian Ownby Groover

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview Date: May 25, 2010

Location: Clinton, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Marian Groover was born in Knoxville, TN, and she grew up in Sevierville, TN. In 1968, she began working at the ENKA (BASF) factory, and this began a long history of working in the industrial sector in east Tennessee. She was one of the first women hired at the ALCOA Corporation in Alcoa, TN. Groover has a long history of unionactivism, especially with the United Steel Workers.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessica Wilkerson is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently conducting research for her dissertation which will explore social justice activism in southern Appalachia, with special attention to women's activism, from the late 1960s through the 1990s.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW. This interview focuses on Groover's experience as a woman entering predominantly male workplaces in the 1970s and 80s. Groover discusses workplace experiences of women employees, such as sexual harassment, maternity leave, and the types of jobs that women were expected to do. She also describes her opinions on marriage, her relationship with family, and her relationship with co-workers. Finally, she describes her views on the women's movement and feminism and how they relate to class.

Interviewee: Marian Groover

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview date: May 25, 2010

Location: Clinton, TN

Length: Approximately 104 minutes

Jessica Wilkerson: It's May 25th, 2010 and this is Jessica Wilkerson and I am with Marian Groover. Marian is going to start by talking about her experience as a woman growing up.

Marian Groover: When I was young, my mother and dad told me I could do anything I wanted to, but then there were restrictions on what women could do at that time. Women were expected to marry when they got out of high school or, if they went to college, when they--during college, they were expected to marry. When I was eighteen I decided I would never marry, and my mother talked to me quite a bit about that because she didn't understand it. I told her I didn't think that I had to do anything because everybody else did.

I went to work at Electro-Voice in Sevierville at that time, and they wouldn't give women the higher-paying jobs. I went to school at UT for a year, and that [working at Electro-Voice] was my first job other than waitressing or something. I talked to everybody about it. I didn't like it. I was told I wasn't supposed to be talking about what people made on their money.

Then about a couple of weeks after we were working--we were making walkie-talkies for the Vietnam War for the Army--and a group of electrical workers who were in

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the union came down from Michigan and they were all men. They were real good-looking young men; they knew they'd hired a lot of young women to work at this place, but my dad had been union, and he'd told all of us, me as well: "If you can get a union job, you'll do better."

So they tried to show us a movie about "unions were communistic." I went ballistic in the meeting, and they stopped showing it because there were other people there whose dads had been in the service who were union. So, in a couple of weeks, they came and talked to me about being a foreman, and I was making \$1.25 an hour. They were going to give me another twenty-five cents, and I told them I didn't want to be a foreman; I wanted to be in the machine shop [laughter]. They told me that was the men's jobs.

My mother was a history person, and I talked about the women who had settled this country, the women in my family; my mother worked, but she didn't always work public jobs. We had a farm; we all worked on the farm. There was no difference between what I did in the field and what my brothers did, and I couldn't see how anyone could say, "This is your job; you have to do this; you can't do this."

I worked there for a year and I wasn't happy, and my sister and brother-in-law had moved to Cleveland, Ohio in the fifties, so I went to Ohio. I had read the things about how more liberated people were in the North, and I went to work first at a small catalog-processing company. We packed women's clothes at night. I went there because they paid well. We had a white foreman and everybody was black but me, and we worked night shift.

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I had told the people who hired me the reason I was in the North. So, the black people didn't know what to do with me because my accent was so thick; I was from the Deep South. The foreman decided after a week that he would date me, and he was married. He was forty or something. I thought he was a hundred. My way of dealing with him was to be very loud and vocal, so even though the majority of the--it was, like, fifty percent men and women that worked there. There was forty-something of us. When we went out that night to catch the bus, the women stood around me and told me that I might be a dumb hillbilly [laughter] but that I had done what I needed to do, and they would take care of me.

The majority of them made more money than the men who worked there. You moved up by how long you had been there, and the men didn't like to work that shift, for some reason. I said, "Nobody else has said anything to me," and they said, "Now that we've found out you've got a voice, these other men are going to be trying to date you." I said, "Don't worry, I'm never going to marry. I'm not going to date these people. She said, "You've got a voice, but if you don't learn to use it the way you should," she said, "You'll always be fighting a battle that you can't win." She said, "You've got to have people that help you." They laid me off in about two weeks; said they didn't have work.

But, I carried that with me and I went to work; I was working at a Manor's Restaurant, and I made lots of money. I made good tips because everybody loved to hear me talk. I was working at Manor's, which is like a Shoney's, but I went to work at another place and I hit the same thing. They hired me in as a shipping-receiving clerk at this little place, and the boss was all about giving women opportunities, but he had three foreman who were men, who were always touching somebody. And the women wouldn't

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say anything. I worked in a little room by myself. I didn't work where they were making the ohmmeters and stuff. I worked one night when they were having a quality problem, because we had to get something shipped, and the guy that was there was awful. He'd walk by somebody; he'd touch them. So when he got where I was at, he decided he'd touch me, and I told him he could not do that. I had never been called [pause]--I'd been called things before, but nothing about being one of them nuts who burned their bra, and he put a lot of other things in front of it. I was unaware; I knew that that had happened, but I wasn't part of that.

JW: You mean the--?

MG: Burning their bras and that kind of thing, and I said, "No, but if that's what keeps--I called him an old fool and something else--from thinking they can touch people. I said, "Do you have kids?" He said, "I do." I said, "Any of them girls?" Everybody's listening to us; there was, like, twelve people that had worked over that were doing this. He said, "You're probably a lesbian." There were two who worked there; I didn't know that. I was very naïve about a lot of stuff. I said, "I don't think I am." I said, "But if you were the other choice, I probably will be."

JW: [Laughter]

MG: He said, "What are you talking about my kids for?" I said, "Your daughter is going to go to work someday. Does your wife work? Did your mother work?" See, my grandmother worked; most of my aunts worked. He said, "I'll get rid of you tomorrow." So the next day when I came in--the boss' name was Don Koone, and he was very--he meant what he said about things, which is rare. So he said, "I have to talk to you," and I said, "Okay." He said, "Can you tell me what happened last night?" So I'm telling him,

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and he said, "I've talked to some of the other women. This has been going on, and I didn't know it." And I said, "So you don't go out and see what's happening?" because I didn't believe him. He said, "I'm a brainiac," or something like that. He said, "This is what I do. I don't deal with that part of it." I said, "He was touching other people and then he wanted to touch me," and he said, "Where?" I said, "Like on my butt." I said, "Now, you can say--brush by somebody and say 'excuse me' or you can put your hand on somebody's shoulder and if they don't like it, they say, 'Don't do that,' but he was touching body parts." He said, "So you're a"--help me here--what was the woman's name who helped burn the bras? You know, she did the Playboy bunny thing. She's my age or a little older.

JW: Oh, like Myra [Wolfgang]?

MG: I can't think of her name now, but anyway...

JW: ...But a famous feminist?

MG: Yeah, yeah. Oh, she's...

JW: ...Like Gloria Steinem?

MG: Yeah, that's her, yeah.

JW: Okay.

MG: I said, "No, but nobody has the right to touch me if I don't want it." And I said, "That's wrong at work; that's intimidation." I thought things would be--he believed me. He said, "Okay, I'm going to handle this." He talked to the guy; that was it. Nothing was done that I felt like was effective. But anyway, I left there. I stayed there about two years, and come back to the South. I missed being here really bad, but I had worked and I had tried to go to work. There were a lot of places that were union; they weren't hiring.

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So a friend of mine went to work at Enka, and she was telling me that I could get a good job there. Well, I went to work there, and the women couldn't bid on the jobs the men had, so I filed grievances, which were shit-canned, but I didn't know that at the time. So, after a period of time, I asked where these grievances were at, and they said they were backlogged, and I said, "Well, I'm going to file something else. I'm going to go to the labor board," because I went to every educational thing the union had, and I think I was just finding out who I was more than doing--I always worked, but I knew that I didn't fit a mold of anybody. And my dad and mother both had said you can do whatever you want to do.

My mother talked to me a lot during that time. She talked to me about being an old maid. She talked to me about was I sure this is where I wanted to go, and I said, "Yeah, this is where I want to go." And I'd date sometimes, but most people didn't like my views, didn't like my outspoken attitude about marriage being a partnership, and all the things that I thought of anyway.

So I finally got to where I could bid on a job that a man had and they wouldn't give it to me. I was laid off in--I went to work there in '68; I was laid off in '72, and none of my grievances had ever gotten to the first step. I filed complaints with the--it was the United Textile Workers. I filed complaints with the people over the local, and they thanked me for doing it.

But there were no women in any position, but we got a little newsletter thing that showed women in all these other places, but this paid a lot; it was high-paying. The men went to the high-paying union jobs in industry. Women were supposed to go--if it was a textile plant, they were making blue jeans or clothes or something, and that was low-

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paying. This was higher paying and it was ninety-eight percent men. I made good money there, but nothing changed when I was there, and the women that I worked with thought I was [pause] crazy. Thought I didn't care if I ever got married. That, to me, never equated to my job, and it does to a lot of people. "You can't make these men mad and have anybody want to marry you." "Well, who cares if they want to marry me? If they can't live with me like I am, why would I--?"

But anyway, I think I kind of changed my mindset a little about getting married during the last year I was there. I got laid off, and I went to Florida for a little while. I didn't go to work; I had some money saved and I met a man who was all about me. "Everything you're saying is great--good. That's the way I think it ought to be," and we got married. I didn't want to change my name, and right down to the day we got married, he was saying, "I want you to; I want our kids to have the same name. I don't want you to keep your name." So I agreed to change my name.

We were married for about nine years and during that time, I went to work at Carrier at Knoxville. That was a Sheet Metal Workers union. I think through my life experience as I was married and dealing with my child and dealing with a husband who had said one thing and didn't mean it when it come down to the roles of men and women. I just continued to change and be more outspoken; I was abrasive. I'm still not good on diplomacy and tact, but I've learned, after probably when I was fifty-five, it finally settled in--the stuff my dad would say to me. My mother had said before she died if I was going to do what I did, I had to learn to be more tactful.

A lot of the men in the unions I worked with that were supportive of women would try to talk to me about the way I handled things, but what I was doing--and the

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reason I didn't want to change is, I was handling it like the men did. If a man saw a problem, he went to the source of the problem; he talked to them; he didn't back down; and that was considered not a good feminine trait.

JW: So how did they expect you to deal with any problem?

MG: They felt like if I could learn more diplomacy, I would get--I usually got the problems handled, but I irritated people so bad, and I said, "But if it's a problem that's black and white, I shouldn't have to bend over backwards to get them to understand." I worked at Carrier for six years, and in the time I was there I got pregnant. When they found out I was pregnant, they were very nice and told me to go home. We were sheet metal workers and I said, "No, and they just passed a law; you can't tell me I've got to go home."

The woman who was the president of our union--it was about eighty percent women and twenty percent men--she backed me up. She was a very quiet, strong person, and she said, "I don't know exactly what to do. I didn't know about this law, but you need to find out all you can because they're going to make you go home." So, by then I had gotten a better job that was easier.

When I started, I was packing ninety-pound furnaces, air conditioning units, off the end of a line, by myself, putting them in a box, turning them over and putting them on a pallet. So I had bid on jobs where I got an easier job; I was sitting and stringing elements. So the day after they told me to go home and I said no, I came in the next morning, and they had cut back in that department to me. They put me on the paint line. It run through the whole building and the furnace housings hung on it. Somebody hung them on it; they went through the paint line and they come out and you took them off.

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When they were painting, you had to take them off, one every three minutes. So they put me back there to take this metal piece that wasn't that--it probably weighed eight pounds, but you reach up, you got it off the hangers; you had to get it turned around and put down, and turn around and get another one. The boss came around about the middle of the day and he said, "How are you doing?" I said, "I'm doing great." He said, "Well, are you going to go home?" I said, "No, but if there's something wrong with my baby, it will sue you." He said, "You are crazy," and I said, "I'm serious as a heart attack." I said, "I had a job that you still need done; you laid me off of it. I'm over here; I'll stay right here." He said, "You can't do this," and I said, "You thought I could or you wouldn't have put me over here." He said, "You can't do it when you've got this big belly in front of you."

There was another foreman come over and he was standing there listening, and he said, "Move her off of it." The first guy said, "No, I'm not doing it." He said, "Yeah, you will." He said, "Why are you doing this?" His name was Paul Bollinger. Paul said, "My wife works, and she's worked 'til she's had every child we've had." Well, the guy who was the manager of the company, about three o'clock that day; we got off at four; they called me to come into the office and they said, "What can we do to get you to go home?" I said, "I've got to work." My husband worked construction--he didn't have insurance. I said, "I need this insurance." They said, "If we pay your insurance, will you go home?" I said, "You need to call Alice in here." He said, "This is between us." I said, "No, if we're going to get something down that says I go home and I have insurance, she has to agree to it."

JW: And that was your union person?

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MG: That was our president. And I knew, I had learned enough--see, everything for me was a learning process, that if they agreed to one thing for me, then it would cover all these other women that were there. So she came in and they were telling her, and she said, "Are you willing to do this, Marian?" I said, "If they'll pay my insurance, I can work somewhere else that will be easier." She said, "No." Because I was thinking *we'll get this for all these other women*. She said, "They'll give you an easy job because you're pregnant if they're willing to do this." And the guy, his name was Ron something that was the manager. He was from California. He said, "We won't do it." I said, "I'll be back in the morning, and I'm going to work 'til I have this baby because I'm healthy." He said, "Women don't work 'til they have their babies." I said, "Women have worked 'til they had their babies forever. Everybody in my family works 'til they have their babies." He said, "No." I said, "Okay, Alice." She said, "I'm calling the business agent. She'll come to work in the morning, and he and I are going to figure out what to do. You've made other women go home. I didn't know there was a law that said they were protected." I came to work the next morning; they put me back on the line, but I went home that night and fixed me a t-shirt; I wrote on it with those paint things like you do Christmas stuff with: MY BABY WILL SUE YOU.

JW: [Laughter]

MG: Big letters. They came over and gave me a shirt to put on over it. They wouldn't let me have that on. But they worked out the jobs where I had been working, stringing these elements. That would be the jobs from then on for women that were pregnant. If they became pregnant and weren't on that job, they would be moved to that job. A person with more seniority would be moved to a job that would pay the same that

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was as good a job, easy a job. They wouldn't displace anybody. I thought *this is great!* They still had me on the paint line.

A week later I asked Alice, "So when do I come off this?" She said, "Are you ready to take the easy job?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Do you feel like you've hurt yourself?" I said, "No." I said, "But I think, in time, it would have been hard." She said, "Okay, I'll talk to him." So the next day, I went in that job, and by the time I was six months pregnant, there were six other people pregnant and they were all on that job.

But I was bidding on these other jobs for more pay that the men had--the welders and the things. The guy who was the manager of the place--they had had men who were human resources people, so they hired a woman who come and talked to me, and I found that this happened a lot later. They would hire a woman to deal with me instead of the men dealing with me. But she came and talked to me and she said, "We can't let you go onto one of these jobs, even with your seniority, when you're pregnant." I said, "I can do some of them." She said, "We fear for the baby." So I said, "Okay, then we need to talk to Alice," and she said, "What for?" I said, "We're going to work it out where I get the opportunity for the ones I miss," and they would not do that. Alice was a little concerned that I was too crazy, but we came in one day and they decided we were all going to work without air conditioning because the paint room, the air conditioning didn't work, then the fans that pulled the paint out of the paint room, so it was all in where we were. I said, "Well, I for sure can't be in here." Now this was after I had Jamie; Jamie was three. Alice said, "What do you think we should do?" and I said, "We should go out in the parking lot." So when we started going out, the manager run out there and he said, "Is this a wildcat strike?" Alice said, "If that's what you want to call it."

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JW: [Laughter]

MG: So we were out there and the business agent, she called him; he didn't show up; he told us we'd get fired. It's what he told her on the phone: "You don't have the right to do this." They were real, real aggressive about safety and health, all this stuff we had to do, so she was calling somebody at the Labor Council, trying to find out if we had some rights about this, about safety. Well, they called us back. They said, "What do we do tomorrow. It's four o'clock, we're all going home. I said, "Bring the kids back tomorrow." That's what we did.

JW: You took your kids to work?

MG: We took our kids to the strike. They told us we couldn't come in to work the next day, that if we came and showed up the next day, they were going to keep us outside the gates because they knew they wouldn't have that fixed. And Alice didn't have kids. Well, about everybody brought their kids. Jamie was three; I had two stepsons that were three and [pause] four older than her, and it was summer. Here we are, nine o'clock, the manager had the business agent out there. We couldn't get him out there, but the manager could. He come around and talked to us, and he said, "You've got to go back to work," and Alice said, "It's not safe." He said, "What are all these kids doing here?" Alice said, "Well, talk to some of the mothers," and she pushed me up there and I said, "If I get something that kills me, that hurts my child's life. I'm here because of the money for my children, for their quality of life, so that's what we're doing with the kids." "Did you call the newspaper?" I said, "No." See, we didn't have cell phones.

After he walked away from me, I went and told somebody else to go down to the store and call the newspaper. They came out; he went back in the plant. He came out and

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told Alice that they would pay us for the day before and that day. They were supposed to get that fixed that night. If we come to work the next morning, without our children, to go to work--if they didn't have it fixed, they'd pay us to stop this.

So it wasn't a long strike, but the people, when we went back to work, it was the most energized thing I had ever seen. People who wouldn't have spoken up before, did. The people who still couldn't speak up were prouder; they were walking around; they had accomplished something. So Alice had somebody from Memphis who she'd been to some training with, a woman, came up there. She was a black lawyer, and we met at a little store after work and she'd talk to us. She stayed for about three or four days, and she told us all these things we didn't know about our rights. She kept saying, "If the company has put it down in black and white in the contract, or if they say it in their meetings and this is what procedure they're going to use--SOP, Standard Operating Procedure, you write it down," and that's what you do. If they say you've got to have air conditioning in this building, and see, if they hadn't said we have to have air conditioning in that building, we would have been without hope, but we had to have it because of that paint room.

So I learned a lot of things then, but I think I kept looking for more opportunities to expand. I didn't think of it as that then. I just knew that I felt like I should be able to do whatever I wanted to do. If I was going to work in the South, and I think that may be the reason there's a difference in the feminist movement in the South; if you worked, there was still a lot of the plantation mentality. You owed them for giving you a job, even though they paid you and you worked hard. I had talked to people about--"Well, speak up!" "Well, we can't; you know, they give us this work." "Well, we should be paid more

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than what they're paying us, instead of us feeling gratitude to them for giving us a job.

We come in; we do our job, that helps them. That helps them. They pay us; that helps us.

They pay us for our labor."

And then I was exposed to some of the people from Highlander, and it was like the sun rose or something, I don't know. It was all this information I didn't have before from women and men who were with Highlander who talked about the labor movement. The labor movement might have been different somewhere else, but here it was still good old boys running everything.

There were women in a lot of the textile industry who were presidents and things, but they were beat down really bad. They didn't make as much money. They would use all kinds of things against them, but the places I worked, the places I got hired, I was fortunate because I made a lot more money. I looked for those places; I applied at those places. All these plants at Oak Ridge, I applied at all of them every time they hired. When they started hiring again at ALCOA, people had been laid off and worked at Carrier with me; men had, and I had found out what they made. They made double what we made-- better benefits, everything. So I applied, and they had had to--ALCOA was mandated to hire women in 1973 by the government because they wouldn't hire them after World War II. It was run completely by women, almost, during World War II, but they laid them all off when everybody came back, put the men back on their jobs, and would not give those women their jobs. There was a handful of women who kept the jobs, but that was it. You're talking about five or six women in eight thousand. That's how many people worked there after the war.

JW: So how did you find out?

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MG: I was always talking to people, everybody who knew where anybody was hiring that was union. Even though I was union at Carrier, but the time I was getting ready to go to work at ALCOA, I was a millwright's helper. I had went back after my daughter was born and I had bid on the welder's jobs and didn't get it, and I had bid on the scrap-shooting jobs and didn't get them, so I bid on the millwright helper's job, and they tested me and made me pass a test. The test, I thought it was going to be hard. They asked me "what was a Phillips screwdriver?" See, I had always done things that--I had worked on things at home. When we grew up, we'd handle tools. If I had a car, I had worked on my car if I could, if I knew what I was doing. But I knew what tools were, and when my first question was "Which of these is a Phillips screwdriver?" I was just amazed. I can't tell you what any of the rest of the questions were but that one. They said, "Well, okay, we'll put you on the job." But it was--. What was your question? I'm meandering off now.

JW: Oh, no, it's okay. I had asked how you learned about those jobs.

MG: Yeah. A lot of the people that I worked with knew about the jobs when they'd be hiring at different places, and it was like you kind of knew who had their ear to the ground about what was going on. My dad told me about all the jobs at Oak Ridge when they was hiring because he was a contractor out there. He was a welder and a pipefitter out of the pipefitter's union. My dad did things to support me without me realizing it. My mother died in '78. When we had that little wildcat strike, my dad came up there and drove around that day. He told the Building Trades Council people what was going on, and that "we better be supporting up there," because he was real active in the union.

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Then, when I went to work at ALCOA, we were on strike. See, when they started the union at ALCOA, they killed people. There were people killed in the birth of that union, and everybody that knows that--my dad knew it. It happened in the thirties but he knew it. When ALCOA did things--he worked in there as a contractor at times, putting up pipes and stuff, and he talked to a lot of those people. ALCOA always puts up a big fence and extra gates. Everything they have is fenced, but they put up another fence, extra gates; they do all kinds of intimidation things prior to a contract negotiation. He knew that they had done bad things to people.

So when we went on strike, the first time I was out there, he went to almost everybody's meetings in the Trades Council, and told them. We had equipment operators and somebody else out of the Trades Council that had been working, and ALCOA said, "We're going to put them up different gates. You're going to let them go in." So my dad called me and he said, "Do you know if they're putting up different gates for those people?" I said, "Yeah, I'm working one of them." So my dad come and brought me a shotgun. I said, "I can't take this on the picket line." He said, "You're going to need it at home." He said, "They do bad stuff to you."

So, Jamie was nine, ten, at that time; Jamie went to the union hall with me when I went. We went on strike, so the first day I went to that gate, I was with a guy I knew and he said, "My wife's bringing the kids up. We thought you was bringing Jamie." I said, "Well, tell her to go by the house and get Jamie," so I called. So Daddy comes by later that day and he was ready to kill me over his granddaughter, nine years old, being on the picket. He stopped across the road and they had the police going by us, and they wouldn't let anybody stop. He'd been parked about two minutes; he was getting out to come across

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the street; he was taking his granddaughter. He come across the street, and just as he started--and he was very nice about it. He said, "I just feel real bad that Jamie's here. I don't like this." I said, "Daddy, we're okay," and he said, "She's (38:17)." He said, "It's not safe."

The police car pulled up behind him, and he said, "You may think you can do anything because you are a Steelworker," and Daddy turned around and he said, "You need to move. I'm on public property. I'm not a Steelworker." He said, "I'm here talking to my daughter, who is a Steelworker." He said, "You don't have the right to be talking to me." He said, "Do you know what public property is? I'm on public property." He said, "Is this your car parked over here? I'm going to write you a ticket for it," because it was just a two-lane road. You didn't have a parking place. Daddy said, "Go ahead. I live in Oak Ridge. I'll go by the WATE on the way home, on Broadway," and the guy got back in the police car and left.

I said, "Daddy, she's fine," and he said, "Okay, but I'm coming back." He stayed over there almost all day and come by every once in a while. He went to the union hall; he talked to the people up there, and they said, "Look, they're not going to bother anybody's child that's out there, but we didn't know they was out there. She shouldn't be out there." So the Maryville Daily Times reporter asked them: "Were they doing that to intimidate ALCOA?" And they said, "Go over there and talk to her."

They never put it in the paper, but the guy come and talked to me and he said, "Why are you doing this?" I said, "This is my livelihood. I make good money here because of the union, but I want to say that this is my child's future here, as well as mine," and I said, "Because ALCOA has always done all this stuff they do to people:

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putting nails under their tires, going to their home and doing stuff.” I said, “People need to be aware that this is more than these people that’s in the plant. This is our whole family that’s affected when they will not give us a living wage.” I didn’t figure he’d put it in the paper because then he said, “You make more than anybody around here!” I don’t know what all he said. I said, “But it’s still not what the Steelworkers in other areas make. It’s not good.”

I think I was prodded by a lot of the men’s attitudes in that union to be even more than I would have been. The company was bad. One foreman told me I needed to be on my back or in the kitchen. Every day when I worked for him, that’s what he told me: “didn’t need to be in there taking a man’s job.” I would tell him: “I hope your wife don’t work, your daughters--.” He’d go crazy when I would mention his family, but we did that every day that I ever worked for that man. And there was a lot of other things that were much worse that management did and said and allowed.

But a lot of the people in the union that I expected support from also felt like I was taking a man’s job, even though “ALCOA has to have ten percent women and minorities,” and that’s still basically what they have. And the women that I knew that worked there, the majority of them were just like me; they were there for the money; they had a family just like the men. There shouldn’t be this distinction about that.

One way that ALCOA tried to weed out women was your physical. You picked up a seventy-five pound barbell and put it over your head. Because of the way I had worked, I was able to do it. They had their own doctor who was crazy--corporations’ doctors don’t have to adhere to anything that other doctors have to. When we was going to do my physical that day, he said, “I want you to take everything off. I’m going to put

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this gown on you,” and I said, “I don’t need everything off.” He said, “I can’t listen to your chest; they can’t take an x-ray,” and I said, “You can listen to my chest through this shirt and they can take an x-ray,” so he made me put the gown on anyway.

Other people have asked me, “Weren’t you afraid you’d mess up getting the job?” Well, I wasn’t going to undress for that guy. And I didn’t know at that time, medical doctors that worked for corporations, they don’t have to have somebody in the room with you. Most of them have some problem is the reason they’re in private industry. When I picked the seventy-five-pound barbell up and put it up over my head, I started to put it down and he said, “No, hold it up there,” so I held it up there for a minute and then I put it down. He was saying “no,” and I said, “I’m not holding that up over my head for a long time.” He said, “Pick it up again.” Well, I did. I said, “What are you trying to prove?” He said, “You know you’re going to have to be lifting stuff like this in there,” and I said, “I know it.” He said, “Well, I’ve got to see that you can do it.” I said, “You just saw it,” and I was hired in spite of that, but I was real healthy; I was young.

They asked me if I would do any kind of work, any shift? I said, “Yeah,” because I knew that’s what you had to do there. They showed you these pictures where you would turn black from being in the carbon dust, and I said, “I’ll do that. The eighteen-hundred-degree heat, I can do that,” and I did it.

But through the years, I bid on jobs that paid more, and there, the heat was the ones who paid the most. You worked with pouring the hot metal. You were around the furnaces. You were standing over it when it was pouring and I did that, and they didn’t want a woman to do it.

JW: Why not?

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MG: Because no woman had ever done it. The men I worked with as I progressed up this ladder, they said, "Well, you know, all the women can't do this." I said, "Anybody can do what we're doing if they're trained," because there were men that worked there that weighed ninety pounds who did this stuff, and I would point this out. "Yeah, but they're stronger." Well, a lot of things about weight is you can't pick up something that weighs more than you do. And ALCOA, for years, did not do the safety and health things they should have done about people's backs. So when I got the job to work around the furnaces, you had to pick up fifty-pound bags of magnesium and copper and stuff. They were in bars. And so, first thing I did was write a safety grievance, because I'd get a fork truck, I'd take the pallet over; you had to put it on a long bar that was on a big truck here, and the bar, then you picked it up and you put it in the furnace. I'd write safety grievances that this was causing back injuries, but I would do it where I didn't pick it up. I'd use a pallet and put it up level with that, and I'd scoot it over with my hands or pull it over. I was still doing strenuous work, but you know how I learned to do that? The men who did those jobs did that. They did what made it easy on themselves. I asked for us to have twenty-five-pound bags and the answer to the first time I wrote that was that the company wouldn't make twenty-five pound bags. I said, "You buy millions of pounds of stuff from this company every year. They'll put it a one-ounce bag if you want it. There's no reason for these injuries." I think a lot of times my dad felt like because I was alone in what I was doing that I just got bolder.

JW: So you were usually the only woman where you were working?

MG: Yeah. When I drove a truck in there--and we drove all kinds of trucks, small to large, they put a lot more women on those trucks, but that was a lower-grade job. As

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you bid up into other things--you bid by seniority, and that was one thing that union stood by was seniority, so as my seniority grew, "Okay, she's got the bid. What's she going to do?" There was one woman who had done what I did before with the pouring there, but she was afraid they were going to lay her off, and she fought for that job. She'd been hired in, like, '73, and she had no problem doing it and she was good at it, but there was a lot of technical things we had to learn. We were like our own metallurgist. We had to know what we were doing because, otherwise, we'd have a hundred-thousand pounds of scrap metal because we'd mixed it wrong, we had put the wrong stuff in.

A lot of the women didn't want to speak up. A lot of women didn't want to rock the boat. A lot of women didn't want to be seen as like I was. I was talked about real bad. Because I was aggressive, a lot of it I didn't know at the time because they wouldn't say it in front of me. When we'd get into grievances, the company would tell me all the stuff that the people I was representing said about me, and I'd say, "Well, that's too bad." I'd go on and I wouldn't let them deter me from representing people because that became--I was as proud of what I was doing as a union representative as I was with accomplishments I did with my job, and I saw results. I didn't have grievances that weren't based on the contract or what the company procedure was. If you have some of those, sometimes you can win them; some you can't. There's ways to work things out that's not in writing without writing a grievance if you can figure it out. The women would be strong sometimes if it really mattered to them, and then sometimes "Oh, we're not fighting that fight. I'm not doing it." So it was kind of a--I was on my own, by standing, even though sometimes they'd be working in the same area I was.

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JW: Do you want to talk a little bit about how you broke into the union, especially into leadership?

MG: I think that some of them just gave up and said, "She's going to be here." But the people that I worked with in my departments, when I would write the grievances--I wrote the grievances for my departments and sometimes for other people in other departments, but they saw that I wasn't for myself. We had leaders who were like that, but then we had leaders who wanted the union positions to try not to have to work as hard or didn't care, really, if they was going to help anybody. That left a bad taste in their mouths about the union, and I hated that because I think the body of the union is what makes it: the people within it. You've got to have good leadership.

The first people that asked me about running for office, I was in a department where we cleaned. We were at the bottom; we were the lowest paid at that time. There had been some layoffs; I got rolled to that department. We went in the pits and cleaned out stuff. Some people got runs where they cleaned bathrooms and break rooms, and that was the good part. The other stuff was awful. But those people in that department asked me to run as their chairman, and I think I told them that I'd have to be their chairperson, and they were mostly men. But I spoke up for, mainly, safety that we had problems with and I stood with them. I didn't leave them alone. If I was on the job and this stuff happened, that's when I would try to take action, so they asked me to run as their chairperson. I was going to, and there was a little move in manpower, so I got put somewhere else. I remember, I don't know who it was, one of the people at the union hall who was in a position--he was elected to something--he said, "Do you really think they would do something just to move you?" And I said, "Yeah, I do, but you can't prove it."

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He said, "No, but you must think a lot of yourself. You must have a big ego." I said, "Well, I didn't think that, but I think ALCOA didn't want me in that position." That happened two more times, because the elections are every three years. By then, I had continued to keep doing what I was doing. We had a man who was the chairperson for the education committee who was ahead of his time. He had worked there during World War II, so he saw the women there. His terminology was "there was more of a cohesiveness," and a lot of people said, "Oh, that was because of the war." He said it was because the women were more willing to bond together for things for everybody, not just for themselves. He got me to join the education committee, and he taught me a lot of things about what to try to do to be as a really good leader. The first time he saw my button, he said, "That probably doesn't need to come in the plant." I said, "It's been in the plant."

JW: [Laughter]

MG: He said, "It's not good. You're fighting too many battles with that here. Do you want to be a union leader?" I said, "I can't change who I am to be a union leader."

JW: So, did he think for you to be a union leader, you had to leave behind feminist ideas? I should say on record, the button says, "This is what a radical feminist looks like."

MG: He felt like it would offend and cause more people who would have been with me to look at me differently, so I kind of rolled that back, but what I did--and I had never pushed it in anybody's face, but I had to wear long-johns and heavy clothes, and then, ALCOA didn't have any air-conditioning. In the winter, we wore all kinds of extra

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clothes, and I always had it on my outside coat in the winter. People had seen it, and nobody had ever said a word about it.

What I did was, I started talking to people in break rooms about feminists, and it was a hot-button issue. They'd say, "We wouldn't want our wives to do that," and I said, "You don't want your wife to work? You don't want your wife to have money? You don't want your wife to vote? You don't want your wife to decide what she wants to do?" "Well, yeah, we want that," and I said, "Well, that's all a feminist is. A feminist says 'I am a person who's entitled to everything that you get in America.'" My dad told me to use that because that brings them back to what it means. You're not saying, "I'm different from you;" you're saying, "I have the same rights you do. I can stand up and say this. I can be educated."

One guy, he said, "That's the worst thing to ever happen is to educate women. I said, "Women have been educated for thousands of years. Sad to say, the poor little workers and people usually didn't get an education, but these social people that were up in England and stuff, where most of us come from, the women got an education for that time." I said, "You know how old the universities are here in the United States?" "Yeah, but they don't let women in." I said, "Yeah, that was part of it. That was part of the freedom that we were supposed to have in this country, is that there would be education for everybody." I said, "That's the reason we've got the best public school system in the world." "Well, we don't," and they'd go into all the problems with the school system. I said, "But shouldn't your daughter--?" And by then, we knew each other; we worked with each other. "Shouldn't they be able to do what they want?" "I wouldn't want my kids to work here," and I said, "Well, that I understand. This is an awful place to work,

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but they should be able to go where they can make the most money. That's the reason I came here; that's the reason you came here."

There was, [pause] in like, let's see, seventy, eighty-one, two--'82, ALCOA hired a lot of women foremen who got treated just like the women on the floor did, and they were trying to bring lawsuits. ALCOA was settling out of court with these people, and most of them were young and really good-looking graduates of some college. Lots of them had engineering degrees; some of them had other degrees, but most of it was engineering, and I found out about this.

The way I found out was that ALCOA decided they were going to do equal opportunity classes. They were going to do classes about "no discrimination." They were going to pay us to go sit in a room at the Hilton, at the airport in ALCOA and have somebody tell us what the law said and what we need to do. The first guy they sent was a black professor from somewhere, but he was in somewhere in Pennsylvania, and he was associated with ALCOA somehow. The class we went in--I was the woman that day--there was four other women in our department then and one black man, and that black man was in our class.

When the guy started, he said, "First of all, I want to tell all of you, nobody here knows what discrimination is like I do." Cookie looked at me--that was the black guy's nickname--and I looked at him, and he was quiet; he was telling me, "Get up! Get up!" and I stood up and the guy said, "Now, I won't take any questions." I said, "I just wanted you to know there's other people in this room that's faced discrimination, or nothing like a black person has." And he had seen Cookie, so Cookie spoke--he didn't stand up, and the guy said, "Well now, ALCOA treats you pretty good, don't they?" and everybody in

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that room just rolled, laughed--. He said, "What's funny?" and one of the guys in the front said, "They don't treat any of us good." But they treated a lot of people worse than they do us. He said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I mean the ones of us that's sitting up here in the front." He said, "Well, is that the reason my brother's at the back?" or something like that; it may not be exactly the way he said it. The guy in the front, he said, "Nope, he knows it's going to be the usual bullshit, so he got him a chair back there where he can go to sleep." The guy was so irritated. He was talking about law; he was talking about stuff, and it didn't have to be me or Cookie that disagreed with him.

When we got back to work the next day--when anything wouldn't go the way ALCOA wanted it, they'd sent a foreman to talk to this one, talk to that one, so they were going out "why did you say this? What was this said?" They said, "Look, it was a lie," and we had Cookie sitting there. Cookie hired in with most of them in the sixties. He said they could remember when they helped him file a grievance to get a better job, because they wouldn't just give it to him. They wouldn't let him just bid on it. They'd just go over him and say, "Oh, we didn't get that card."

We were at lunch that day; we were all taking lunch at the same time, which was unusual, and they were telling me how glad they were that they were able to tell that guy the straight of it. Cookie said, "You need to thank somebody," and the guy said, "We thank you, Cookie." He said, "You need to thank everybody in this room." He said, "Everybody did what was done over there, but it took somebody continuing to say, over time, this is wrong. And who stood up and spoke? If she hadn't stood up, I wouldn't have. We'd have to know that she has done this for us." "Well now, we helped you," and he said, "You did, but there's been a change because she--." By then, I was department

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chairman. He said, "It's not just for her department; it's for everybody. It's what feminists do," and they all laughed. They said, "No," and he said, "Yeah." He said, "A good union leader would do what she does, but she's both. She's a feminist who says 'this has to be done right' for me, for the--." And I always tried to say stuff about the people that are coming after us because the unions wouldn't have been there for us if there hadn't been people who laid their lives on the line from the time they started, the women who started many years ago in those factories. They said, "We have nothing to lose."

I think my daughter growing up with me, seeing what I did, it wasn't like a mirror, but I saw myself in her. When she was in the eighth grade, she had played soccer for a couple of years; she had played all kinds of sports, but she wanted to play soccer in high school. And they didn't have a soccer team for the girls at Maryville High School. She and the other girls bonded together, and went to the school and asked them to have a team for them because they had the same rights the boys did for a team, and the school agreed. They found a coach--they first said they didn't think they could because of a coach, but a guy, he did it. Jamie was just like--she had spoke; she and these other girls changed something that was wrong. It was unfair in principle, and that's what they all said when they got in there--they said, "This is unfair in principle." The vice-principal of the school, he talked to me afterwards. He said, "I guess you led this." I said, "I had nothing to do with it."

JW: [Laughter].

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MG: I said, "They wanted it and they saw that it was such a skewed thing to have"--and one of the girls' mothers had got out the Title IX information for them, but they were so proud of what they did.

JW: So how do you think feminism affected you or impacted you in a personal way, in you personal life?

MG: I don't think I can separate it from anything else. When I was married the first time, I changed my name. I've never changed my name since. I was married again for fifteen years, and when we first talked about getting married, he said that he saw no problem with that; that was fine with him--until about a week before we were going to get married, and he started talking about it, how he didn't know. I said, "I'll walk away. This shouldn't be an issue." He had done some homework somewhere, I don't know, but he said, "It's something to do with your grandmother," and I said, "Well." I had also studied more about--women used to keep their names. That was part of their heritage; they didn't change their names as they married. The queens didn't in England. People didn't in Germany. Women didn't change their names. A lot of countries, they still don't, and to me, I think part of the feminist part was that I didn't want to belong to somebody else. I could be part of somebody else; I could be a partner. So I asked him if he'd change his name. If it was that big of an issue, we'd just both be--. "Well, that's not even your name; that was your first husband's name," and I said, "Well, that's my name, and I'll never change it again." So we put off getting married for two months and I wouldn't talk to him about it. So he come to me and he said, "I realize how important this is to you," and he said, "so I'm--and I think I understand it." But when we got divorced after fifteen years--we had a good marriage--he was a strong person for women--he told me that that

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always bothered him. Well, see, I feel like a feminist is able to say, "This bothers me," and men can be feminist. You can't swallow something and carry it around. That's just a stone in your shoe. That's going to cause you a problem every day, whatever you--why would you do that? I never understood that, but I think I became more--I don't think I got a bigger ego; I think my self-confidence from the time I was eighteen 'til the time I was probably thirty-five, I grew. My self-confidence changed so immensely that it was unbelievable, about what I felt like I could do.

When I was laid off at ALCOA in '92, I went to work on a government job out of the country, and I had no hesitation. I remember thinking, when I was filling out those papers--*I wish I would have known about this when I was young. I would have done this kind of thing and traveled.* Because of the money, I would have been able to retire early, and go around and tell other women: "Do this." It made me a different person, and a person I really like. That's the thing that I tried to really teach my daughter by example, and my mother was very happy with herself [pause] and she talked about that to me. But my mother wanted to be married; she wanted to have children. My mother was very happy, and I think for a long time I wasn't happy. I don't think I was who I wanted to be. I was satisfied, but I think there's a big difference in your life if you feel complete with what you do in your job or profession and in your personal life. One of them can be twenty percent one day and eighty percent, and another day they can be fifty-fifty, and another day it can be--. The other way, I don't think there's any way to [pause] ration them to be the same all the time. I know I was glad, but I'm glad I've done what I did in my life.

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I think back to my mother; my mother did a lot of help for people who weren't able to do things for themselves in our community. After my mother died, I was going home from work one day--it was a four-lane road and all the traffic was stopped. I was far enough back I couldn't see the wreck, so I got off the side of the road and was just sitting there, and a woman about two cars up, she got out and she went up to the wreck and looked, and she come back and then she saw me. She come back and she said, "You don't remember me, do you?" and I said, "No." She told me her name. She said, "Your mother brought us books and helped us when we were kids, and she said, "I'll never forget it." I remember thinking *I just hope I can do something like that*, because I've always felt--my mother was very spiritual--you have to help people if you see they need help. You can't turn a blind eye, and I think I did that in my personal life without thinking about it at work, but I think I did it in a different way than she did because I still do lots of charitable stuff. But I worked with people who said, "Charity is for home, not here." I couldn't separate the two because I think you're supposed to be who you are if you're helping anybody.

JW: So, did you see your work in the union as fulfilling that role for you?

MG: I think I did. I think I was unaware of it for a long time, but I think when I became more aware that that's what I was kind of doing is. I had been at ALCOA twenty-four years before they ever tried to fire me. I had never been written up for anything about my jobs. The grievances I wrote and the things that I did for people helped the body; it helped everybody. It helped that person at that time and it helped everybody, but I didn't have extreme grievances for myself until they started trying to fire me, and then I'd get back to work. One of the people I worked with, (1:13:32), he told me, "This is

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what you've been doing for everybody else all the time," because there was people who lost their jobs. There was pregnant women they abused. There was people who they just treated wrong. You are supposed to do what's right if you say you're going to. All these companies have a mission statement that they should live by, or they should say, "No, we're going to treat you like crap! Come on to work!"

JW: [Laughter].

MG: You know? Don't lie. So I guess I did--I've accomplished that some, and now, the things I do are [pause] more personal charitable stuff. But I'm still a feminist. My husband, he's great; we'll be married ten years January first next year, and I didn't date for, like, three years after I got divorced. When we were dating, I was driving and he said, "You want a piece of gum?" and I said, "No," so he took a piece of gum and he rolled the window down. I said, "Do not throw anything out of my car--ever! We had known each other about a month. He said, "What if I want to?" I said, "You'll get out with it." He said, "Are you that strong?" I said, "If I feel strongly about something, I'm going to tell you." I said, "There's a bag right there to put that in," and we were going somewhere to supper and he said, "I'll put it right here." He said, "I wouldn't throw anything out. I was just kidding."

So we were eating and we were talking, and this was the saddest thing I had ever heard, and I've heard it since--a lot of women, as they get older, even if they're strong, if they date when they're older, they will change their ways. He said, "So you're a true feminist?" and I said, "I think I am." He said, "I'm glad. I can't understand a woman who would ever be anything--but, his mother is strong; the people he has been around are strong; his daughter is very strong; his first wife was strong. It's just this whole "Why

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would you let a personal relationship make you be something you're not?" Then, to me, you'd be miserable, I think.

JW: Well, I think we have to stop here now, but hopefully we can continue this conversation.

MG: Okay.

JW: So thank you this time, Marian.

MG: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Mike Hamrick, August 12, 2010

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