Louise Fassero discusses the organization of the PMA and its Women’s Auxiliary in Gillespie and Benld, Illinois: controversies, march on the Illinois Statehouse and other marches, meetings and conflicts of the PMA. She also discusses the Depression and raising chickens. See J9/5/24 History Program, Oral History “Coal Mining in Illinois” Project, Subject File 1909-1977. University of Illinois at Springfield Archives/Special Collection.
Q: Louise, I wondered if we could start by you telling me where you were born and when you were born.

A: I was born in Mount Olive, Illinois in Macoupin County, of course, 1908, April 4th.

Q: Was your father a coal miner?

A: My father was a coal miner. He worked in the United Mine Workers. He was at Virden the night before the tragedy.

Q: And he wasn’t there the night of the tragedy?

A: No he was not. He was in Mount Olive. He helped receive some of the dead as they were brought on the train. He was especially upset about a Mr. Gitterle who was a very good friend of his. His name is on the stone at the cemetery.

Q: How long was your husband a coal miner?

A: All his life, he went into the mines at the age of 14, he died when he was 62. So George was a coal miner around I should say around 42 years.

Q: Where did he start in the mine?

A: Here in Benld, #2 mine.

Q: So he was from the Benld area originally?

A: Yes, he was born in Spring Valley and came into Benld when he was around five years old.

Q: You and your husband were both certainly in on the formation of the Progressive Miners. I wondered if you can tell me just a little about oh, any recollections you have about what happened before the foundation of the Progressives, mass meetings, for instance.

A: Well my dad was a very staunch United Mine Worker of course. He had been crippled at #1 mine, when the #1 mine was first formed. And this was before the days of compensation, he was very badly crippled, his lower back was paralyzed, and he walked crippled. So he became an insurance man when he got on his feet, which was about three years after his accident. And then he became a policeman in Mount Olive for around 28 years or so.

Q: So the Progressives had at least one policeman on their side.

A: Oh yes indeed. His heart and soul was labor, believe me. He could not see us pulling away from the United Mine Workers. This hurt him very much because he had fought for the United Mine Workers just like we were fighting for the Progressives. There were a lot of mass meetings held and there were a lot of friends who turned against friends because of it, a lot of hard feelings in some of the communities because of it.

Q: Do you think Mount Olive was more split than for instance, the Gillespie-Benld area?
A: I think there were up to a point until the Progressives really got going. We had speakers come in that enabled them to understand the situation better.

Q: Could you describe a mass meeting for me.

A: Well, a mass meeting was a wonderful thing, we would just simply announce that it was to be held and people would come, they came in droves. Those that couldn't drive, walked. It was really something to see. The towns were so empty. It was a marvelous thing to see, such a crowd in one place. And when the speakers started to speak, they held the attention of the people. They really did. You didn't see people wander off and start for home. Things were very hard, you got to understand this, you know, and we didn't know where your next meal was coming from in some instances. And you did listen, this was your husband’s job, this was your livelihood.

Q: So women and children attended these meetings as well as the men?

A: Oh yes.

Q: When were they usually held?

A: On Sunday afternoon or early in the evening.

Q: Have you any idea how they could have formed something like the Mulkeytown March? Would this have been an outgrowth from one of these mass meetings?

A: Yes indeed.

Q: And you were living in Benld at this time of the March?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about, from your viewpoint, what it was like?

A: Well, I wasn’t in on this march. But I can tell you when all the men left town it was a frightening thing in a way to see. The town was just practically empty.

Q: And they left about what time of day? Do you remember?

A: No I don’t remember. I think it must have been early in the morning.

Q: Do you remember getting reports back from what happened at Mulkeytown?

A: No. I couldn’t be of any help. You know, there were a lot of reports. My husband did not attend this march.

Q: He was probably one of the few left in town that day.

A: He was out of town that day. He couldn’t attend. He was in the hospital.

Q: Perhaps he was lucky. Can you remember at all the meeting in Gillespie when the Progressives were formed? The first meeting was September 1, 1932. Do you remember hearing talk about it or did your husband attend that meeting?
A: My husband attended that meeting. It was at the Colonial.

Q: Did he talk to you at all about what their hopes were for the new union? How they were going to go about it?

A: They were heart and soul into forming a new union. The gist of it all was to pull away from the United Mine Workers and become an independent union.

Q: Was the Benld area fairly solid behind the Progressives?

A: Oh yes I think it was.

Q: Then there wasn’t as much of the father against son type thing here as in Mount Olive?

A: I think in Mount Olive so many of the older people like my father had been in on this road and riot and this is what made them feel so strong against another union. They felt that so much blood as a union heart that this shouldn’t happen. So really it was loyalty to the union that made them feel that way again.

Q: Did they think you were a bunch of rebel revolutionaries?

A: Yes they certainly did. We often got into such a strong argument at our dinner table and we were told to cool it and discuss everything else but politics and union.

Q: That’s marvelous. When did you join the women’s auxiliary?

A: I cannot remember the date but it was when we had the charter given to us at the show.

Q: At the show?

A: At the old show building. We had a meeting that filled that show. Now we had seats in the show, but believe me, people were standing in the aisles, along the aisle, into the back, and we all took our pledge up there.

Q: Now when you say show building, was that like a movie house?

A: There was a theater, yes. The building still stands. Grand Theater, yes.

Q: Could you give me any estimate of how many women were there?

A: There had to be a few thousand, for sure.

Q: And your local was formed, did you call it a local, what did you call it? You were formed after Gillespie?

A: We just called it the Women’s Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of Local so and so, is what I mean. See we affiliated with the men. We were behind the men from the four mines, #1, #2, #3, #4. And I think, was this #1?

Q: Well I think Gillespie had the first charter. Perhaps you were the second.
A: Well, this is how we affiliated. We affiliated behind the men.

Q: I’ve heard there was quite a bit of controversy in those early Women’s Auxiliary meetings. Can you remember any of those?

A: Well there was a lot of arguments, but I think a lot of us got off the beat. We finally had to make laws and the laws was read at our meeting last Wednesday, but we needed them. You have no idea how badly we needed them. To keep them in order we really had to have them.

Q: Do you remember anything about when they decided to change the name from the Ladies’ Auxiliary to the Women’s Auxiliary?

A: No I don’t.

Q: Do you remember any controversy about the uniform?

A: Well no, I think it’s just something we accepted. I think we all went along with the uniform. I didn’t hear anyone have any dissention at all about the uniform.

Q: You can’t remember any other problems that arose that had to be discussed and talked out and then passed by the majority?

A: Well no, our meetings were hot and heavy. I can’t remember anything. We weren’t sure how long it was going to last. The meeting was called to order at seven and you didn’t know when you were going to get home. There was a lot discussed.

Q: Was your husband in favor of you being a member of the Women’s Auxiliary?

A: Oh absolutely. Yes, definitely.

Q: Why?

A: Well because he wanted me to understand where he was going. He was going to meetings and there was a lot of discussion, some we were in favor of, some we weren’t. We had a lot of friends in and out of the house. There was a lot of arguments, but I don’t think I ever lost a friend to it. I can’t recall it.

Q: Did you go on the march to Springfield?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about that?

A: Well, we left early in the morning. We left on a bus and the busses were crowded. We came into Springfield and this was held in the old armory building. There was so many people. We paraded past the Governor’s Mansion. The women in all their white. The men first and of course we had our school bands.

Q: Oh you did?
A: Yes some of the school bands. We really made a march out of it. This was a gigantic thing. So when we entered in the building, we really stood elbow to elbow.

Q: When you say “in the building” this was the Capital building?

A: I really don’t remember whether we stayed in the armory or marched from there and back to it again.

Q: Did you think the march accomplished anything?

A: Oh, I think it did. I think the strength of the people, the amount of people that were there, had a lot of weight.

Q: Well, Governor Horner, at that time I guess said that he would give the Progressives some help.

A: But he didn’t in the long run. We were very disappointed in Governor Horner. My father was one of the men behind Governor Horner. So the Governor brought another great big argument in our family and we finally swayed him our way.

Q: Oh you did?

A: Yes.

Q: What other kinds of activities did the early Auxiliary engage in?

A: Well there was soup kitchens.

Q: Did you help set up some of those?

A: I really can’t recall any soup kitchens here in town. They had them in Wilsonville.

Q: So you personally didn’t work in a soup kitchen.

A: No I did not participate in the soup kitchens.

Q: And you didn’t picket?

A: No I did not picket. I have a sister who was on the picket line [unintelligible] but I did not picket.

Q: You often had quite a few fundraising activities, didn’t you? In this area?

A: Yes. Pie baking and things like that. We raised money.

Q: Do you remember a play that was put on? I believe it was in Gillespie. That’s all right.

A: I do remember it. I do recall it now that you mention it.

Q: What was the public reaction to your march in Springfield? How did the crowd on the street, for instance, treat you? Were you aware of any hostility?
A: Yes.

Q: Oh there was?

A: Among some of our merchants, I think they thought that by doing this the mines were going to be sold out of work, you understand. There were some of them that could not see our plan, you know, forming a new union over this old union.

Q: So some of the merchants here were against you too. How about the sheriff and the deputies in this county?

A: No, I can’t say that. I knew them quite well. They went along with it.

Q: Were you aware of any reaction in Springfield when you were there?

A: No, they made way for us. It seemed like there was such a crowd they couldn’t do anything else but. I mean, after all, when you say you are going to do this thing and you have a number behind you, you do it. It was a do or die thing, because my whole heart went into that. I think that was a wonderful thing to do and you did have to show strength.

Q: Was this the only time then that you demonstrated?

A: This is the only time I demonstrated. I thought that it was exactly the thing to do. But I did feel that the men should have been marching in front. I felt we should be behind them in number.

Q: Your men seemed to have always been very much behind the Women’s Auxiliary.

A: Oh yes, they were. You can believe they were.

Q: Do you think just as an educational thing or because you, as women, were really helping develop this new union?

A: I think the help was there. I think it was more of a help than educational. Really I don’t think any of us gave education a thought at that time. It was something we thought we had to do and we did it.

Q: And it goes to the fact that all you women had been at the mass meetings, you were as up on the issues and problems as the men were.

A: That’s right. And if we didn’t understand, there was questions asked from the audience that explained.

Q: You women could ask questions?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember the first president of the Women’s Auxiliary? Agnes Burns Weick?

A: Yes.
Q: What did she look like? Can you describe her for me?

A: Well she was just an ordinary person. She was a good speaker. She spoke very well. I remember her speaking more than anything else really. She was just another woman as far as I was concerned. I thinks she was really average.

Q: Do you think there was more speaking in the women’s groups than there was in the men’s group?

A: No, the men held meetings.

Q: I’ve always assumed that Gillespie and Benld both, the whole towns, were behind this new movement. Is that true?

A: There were merchants that were in favor of it. Those that understood. But these people that did not understand it, took no part in understanding it, worried that the mines would be thrown idle and of course people couldn’t pay their bill. You know there was an awful lot of credit in this area. I can understand these merchants in a way. Because everybody had credit. And my goodness when you take into consideration if you bought food on credit, this was a terrible thing.

Q: Were there certain merchants who went along from the beginning and supported you?

A: Yes there was merchants that did support us. But there were some, like I say, that didn’t quite understand it and I think it was in their heads, they’d have been happier to go along with us.

Q: Would they withhold credit from you?

A: No. I can’t remember anyone withholding credit. Do you know I remember, now we were very fortunate, we had a garden, and the most I remember being in debt was $90. But do you know, I picked berries, I picked raspberries to buy license for our old car for six months and I remember taking all this change in to our city clerk and she had a fit. She said, “Don’t tell me you’re going to do this!” and I said, “I sure am.” We need to go and we can’t go and we measured the gas with a stick we had in the garage and this gas took us, if we wanted to go to a mass meeting, we knew just how far we could go and get back. But you used that car for no pleasure, believe me. All I can say is, we did have a car. I can’t believe I was ever that poor. But I did. I’d get up at 4:30 in the morning, pick berries in the raspberry patches and the few pennies I got for a quart I saved. And I remember I’d be home around 9:30 or 10 o’clock to do the washing, take care of the family or whatever, you know.

Q: You had children at this time?

A: I had one son. He is a school teacher right now, high school.

Q: Of course, this did take place during the Depression. All of the country was in trouble.

A: It sure did. Yes indeed. It’s amazing when I think of how little we had.
Q: The storekeepers who when along with you at the beginning, did any of them have to go out of business because of it?

A: No I don’t think any of them did. I can’t remember any of them going out of business. None of them filed bankruptcy as far as I know.

Q: But you still remember with fondness?

A: Yes, I remember sharing a quart of tomatoes with my next door neighbor too.

Q: Did you raise any of your own chickens?

A: Oh yes. My mother-in-law and I used to cut them in half, half for you and half for me. Now I wouldn’t think anything of cooking one for myself. But you made it go a long way.

Q: Did you have a cow or a pig?

A: My mother-in-law had a cow. But no, we didn’t raise pigs. We did when I was growing up. My dad butchered four pigs every winter. Of course we were a family of seven.

Q: I’ve heard too, that during this period there was a great sharing. If you had, as you just said, a quart of tomatoes, you shared.

A: That’s right.

Q: You think that is something we are losing today?

A: Well, I think it is because I remember one time my husband cut grass with a sickle and would you believe when he threw it over the fence to the chickens they got all riled up and one of them began to choke. Now we didn’t want to lose that chicken, no way, would you believe we operated on it? We took the wad of grass out of it's craw and we sewed it up and it got well. And I sold some of these chickens later on and I was always worried, goodness who’s going to get this chicken? And I’d tell everybody about it and I think they thought I was some kind of nut, the way some people would look at me. Anyway a lady living in my neighborhood got this chicken and she was so thrilled about it. She said, "Louise, would you believe, it was just partly green where you sewed it, you did a beautiful job of sewing it.” [Laughing] So when you work to save a simple thing like a chicken, you knew you were really poor and you had to save what you had. So this is it.

Q: When your husband first started in the mines, there were no washhouses were there?

A: No, the family had a shanty in the yard and they had one of these little laundry stoves with the four plates. This is what the water was heated on to wash anyhow. But the mother would fire up the stove, she had a lot of boarders too that worked in the mine. The men would all come home and one right after the other would go in and take their bath.

Q: Well that sounds nice.
A: I think it sounds terrible.

Q: It sounds better than the miners that had to take their baths in the middle of the kitchen though.

A: Well yes. A lot of the families did have these shanties in their yard and they did use it for this purpose and of course the women used them for washhouses.

Q: Well the advent of washhouses must have made a big difference to you as a wife and mother.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember when they started tightening up safety regulations in the mine and improvements, or perhaps even lack of improvement?

A: Yes and I think that’s when they started, what in the world is the name of the men that did that, inspectors. And there was miners hired as inspectors as well. And they would make the trip into the mine and all through the mine and I think they did this after working hours. I think they did this on what they called, I guess it was third shift.

Q: In those early days there weren’t hard hats. There weren’t safety shoes.

A: No. I still have a cap in the basement, just a plain old miner’s cap. They belonged to my husband at one time.

Q: Well those things are valuable, those and the old lamps too.

A: Yes, in later years the mines became quite modern. At the bottom of the shaft they had electric lights, of course not into the mine they didn’t, but right at the bottom they did. And then of course they got their washhouses, which were nice. When the men would come in they would put their clothes they came in, they would put their everyday clothes on a hanger and then they’d pull up the chain and pull their dirty clothes down so they could get into them. And they brought them home about twice a week.

Q: That certainly must have helped the miner’s wife.

A: I think so. To have a washhouse, yes. You didn’t have this at home. And the clothes and the dinner bucket would reek of the stink, you know.

Q: Did you ever have boarders at this house?

A: No. My mother-in-law did, but I never did.

Q: I guess packing the lunches for miners was quite a…

A: [Unintelligible] We lived in two rooms for many years.

Q: Can you remember any other things you did during this period of time.
A: Oh yes. I needed a dress so very bad. So I got the material, I can’t remember what I paid for it but it wasn’t too much, and we weren’t wearing them as short as we did some time back. Anyway this was a short dress because I only bought me so much and would you believe I sewed this dress with a needle and thread by hand and it was very nice. But the stitches were so tiny and it didn’t take me very long to make it. But I had no sewing machine and it wasn’t sewed at all with a machine stitch. It had a collar on it.

Q: While we are talking about clothes, how did you procure your first Auxiliary uniform? Do you remember?

A: Oh I made mine. Yes, I remember. I couldn’t afford linen. I found some real cheap seersucker and I made it out of that and I made a pillow top for the bed out of the little pieces left over.

Q: How about your hat?

A: Well, I believe that our hats had to be made of linen. They wanted the dresses made of linen too. I finally got a linen dress later on, but my first one was not. All I can tell you is it was white. But that was it. I know I bleached that thing and everything thing else. I didn’t know it until I was standing beside everyone else but mine wasn’t quite white.

End of Segment