

'By the sweat of our brow'

By Marian Green
Of the Emerald

A little more than 50 years ago, unions were making their initial emergence in Lane County industries, and employees often worked long hours for low wages.

But not much has been recorded about those Depression days when workers and labor organizers spilled sweat and blood to unionize the local woodworking and canning industries, according to local labor historian Kathryn Hunt.

Hunt recently compiled a year's worth of interviews and research into a slide show called, appropriately, "By the Sweat of Our Brow."

In Hunt's presentation, depression-era black and white photos mix with current photos of three union organizers, who describe conditions during the period of initial union organizing. Banjo music and early union songs provide the musical soundtrack.

"I felt like there was a need for some material on labor history," Hunt says. "I felt that a lot of people were uninformed."

The three organizers, who worked in the cannery and woodworking industries, tell the story of local unionization efforts through recollections of their experiences during the depression.

"I decided I wanted to hear about labor history from the people who participated and organized during the depression," Hunt says.

After interviewing about 15 local union representatives, Hunt chose three organizers — Leona Zilkowski, Harold McPherson and J.D. "Shorty" Carter. "They were rank and file organizers moved by conscience and anger to change things," she says.

Zilkowski, 71, is one of three workers who organized about 600 women and 100 men employed at the Eugene Fruit Growers Association — now Agripac — into the Cannery Workers Union.

McPherson, 78, helped organize 700 employees in the Booth-Kelly lumber mill — now owned by Georgia-Pacific — into the International Woodworkers of America.

Carter, 58, was a dustbowl refugee



Photo courtesy Lane County Museum

Union organizing improved wages and working conditions for Lane County workers such as these women at the Eugene Fruit Growers Association cannery, now Agripac.

who came to Oregon from Texas and became an organizer for the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

These old-time organizers give a historical perspective to today's events, Hunt says, especially to the depressed economy.

"Each of them sees some similarities between the depression and now," she says. "One of the main things it (the slide show) says is that older people have something to teach us."

McPherson, who grew up on a farm outside of Springfield and began working at the Booth-Kelly mill at age 15, talked about labor relations at the mill, which was considered the "bread basket" for the town of 3,400 people.

"We felt that people should be taken care of... and that the workers should get more than a kick in the seat of his

pants," said McPherson in the slide show.

Workers didn't have such things as breaks, working from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. without time off, he said. The foreman also treated the employees arbitrarily. "If he didn't like the way you looked, he'd fire you," he said.

Hunt says she had to talk Zilkowski into being interviewed because Zilkowski didn't think her story was important.

"I really had to convince her that I believed in her story," but the interview brought back many memories for Zilkowski, who cried at times and returned to the cannery for her first visit in 30 years.

"Her daughter never knew her mother was a labor organizer" until the show came out, Hunt says.

History catches up to County Museum

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As librarian at the Lane County Museum, Ed Nolan is painfully aware that the days when an unemployed person could always find work in a mill are over.

"There were always the mills. You could always go work up in the woods," he says.

Nowadays, the local economy is causing layoffs in the once-stable mills and cuts in county government jobs, including those of Nolan and two other museum staff members.

Museum Director Glen Mason says the museum's present \$135,000 budget was chopped in half after the county's \$10 million tax base measure was defeated in May. And because fixed costs such as maintenance and electricity make up most of the museum's costs, "essentially the only place we have to cut are salaries," Mason says.

In addition to Nolan, museum curator Loretta Harrison and a custodian will lose their jobs. The museum will be open only four days a week, from Wednesday through Saturday.

The museum provides valuable services to the community, Mason says, but "it's sort of hard to compare the museum to 'Meals on Wheels' (a county service to housebound residents)."

Mason says he wishes the museum had advance warning of the county's financial problems so it could have started searching for alternative funding. The museum is forming a friends of the mu-



Photo by Erich Boekelheide

Lane County Museum Director Glen Mason, right, stands with curator Loretta Harrison and librarian Ed Nolan, who are losing their jobs due to budget cuts.

seum organization to raise more funds from the private sector, he says.

County residents will have limited access to museum artifact collections and to the library, which houses 40,000 Lane County photographs, 250 manuscript collections and 300 linear feet of genealogical information, Mason says. "It will sort of be catch as catch can" for

residents to happen into the museum on a day when the person working can locate the desired information as efficiently as Nolan and Harrison can.

University students will be hard hit because they frequently use the library and artifact collections for research projects, Nolan says.

"It's not going to affect the person who

After Zilkowski became an active organizer, she found herself placed on the least popular shifts. When the American Federation of Labor offered her a position, she left the cannery, Hunt says.

Zilkowski started working at the cannery when she was 21, and she said the women always arrived early for their 10-hour shifts. "You knew that you'd better be there because there was always someone there ready to take your job," Zilkowski said.

The cannery paid its employees under a system which pitted workers against each other to can as much fruit in the shortest amount of time.

"What it did was make people who worked side by side literally hate each other," Zilkowski said.

Carter was one of the 40 million people without steady incomes during the Depression. He left home at age 15, leaving the Texas dust storms which would come through the doors and windows and sting his face, like "sandpaper." He traveled through Arizona and California and eventually settled in Oregon because he liked the "green valley."

Although union organizing was legalized by the National Industry Recovery Act in 1933, Carter said union activism was a dangerous occupation. He said organizers were often blacklisted or beaten and would have to move or change names to get a new job.

He was active in the Congress of Industrial Organizations and was concerned with the plight of the unskilled workers, who had little power.

"You needed a union to get your fair share," he said.

Hunt says several Springfield schools and local labor unions have shown the slide presentation, and other organizations can borrow the show by contacting the Springfield Planning Commission at 726-3759. The slides and tapes are free, and equipment may be rented on a sliding scale of \$35 to \$65.

The slide show is sponsored by the Springfield Historical Commission and funded by the Oregon Committee for the Humanities, the Lane County Labor Council, the Communications Workers of America and the Industrial Woodworkers of America.

comes to the museum once in awhile as much as people who use the museum for regular research activity," Mason says.

Cutting back on services may also reduce donations, Mason says. Special collections such as the museum's quilt, photo and manuscript collections have helped "snowball" donations.

Caring for the collections develops expertise shared with the community. Nolan and Harrison say they are "always getting calls" for information asking how to take care of a quilt or photo.

Mason says he worries that the contacts and connections Nolan and Harrison have built up during their years at the museum may lose touch with the museum. People who have contributed items previously will be reluctant to donate in the future or will demand items be returned because the collections won't up go drifting," says Nolan, a graduate of the University's now-defunct library school who came to the museum in 1977 after working for a time as a librarian in Seattle.

The museum will be getting out into the community more often, Mason says.

"I think people's awareness level is increasing," he says. And the 950-person turnout to the recent, museum-coordinated walk through Eugene's historic homes substantiates his claim.

"People don't have to be afraid it's going to disappear. It'll be here in some form or another," Mason says. "We think history is important or else we wouldn't be here."