

Let me say this about that

—By Gene Klare



Willner enters Hall

DON S. WILLNER, a Portland attorney who represents labor unions and who compiled an exemplary pro-worker voting record as a Democratic member of the Oregon Legislature, takes the spotlight as the newest member of the Northwest Oregon Labor Retirees Council's Labor Hall of Fame.

Willner, 81, still practices law but with a reduced caseload. He represented Multnomah Typographical Union No. 58, Mailers Local 13 and Portland Newspaper Guild Local 165 in the bitter strike against the Oregonian and Oregon Journal, which began Nov. 10, 1959 and lasted until April 4, 1965, when the unions stopped picketing the two scab-staffed Newhouse papers. Willner was also the attorney for the strike-born Portland Reporter, which the strikers and their unions started in February 1960. He wrote a column, "Oregon Today," for the money losing tabloid Reporter, whose presses ceased running on Sept. 30, 1964. When the Reporter began selling stock at \$10 a share, Willner sold stock to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, whom he had met while he was a student at Harvard and active in the Democratic Party.

ANOTHER HISTORIC labor event in which Willner participated as an attorney was the formation in 1964 of the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers. The Portland-based AWPPW was founded by Bill Perrin and others as a 21,000-member independent union of West Coast papermill workers who were not satisfied with the representation given them by two existing unions. The AWPPW is now part of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. Earlier this year, Willner participated in a panel on the history of the AWPPW at a conference in Portland of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association. On the panel with him was Harold E. King, a colleague of Perrin in establishing the AWPPW. Both belonged to Oregon City Local 68. King, who later lobbied with Perrin at the Legislature in Salem on legislation benefiting seniors, is the secretary-treasurer of the NW Oregon Labor Retirees Council.

Willner was born on May 22, 1926 in New York City. He served in the U.S. Army, graduated from Harvard College in Massachusetts with a bachelor's degree, then attended Harvard Law School and earned a law degree. He recalled that he passed up graduation ceremonies for his bachelor's diploma because he had a chance to attend a New York Yankees baseball game when Mickey Mantle was one of the team's stars. After becoming a lawyer, Willner obtained a job with a law firm in Washington, D.C.

HE MOVED to Portland in 1952 after checking out the Rose City on a visit the year before. He opened a law office downtown in the Corbett Building and also maintained an office in the St. Johns area of North Portland. His partner in the downtown office was Harlow Lenon, who was later elected a Circuit Court judge. Willner

credits Burl A. Green, a pioneering labor union lawyer in Portland, with steering him into the same field. Willner was active in civil rights causes and became the attorney for the Portland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a post he held from 1954 to 1964.

Willner became active in the Democratic Party and in 1956 won election as a state representative in a North Portland district. Although he was a freshman legislator in the 1957 session, State Rep. Willner was appointed as chairman of a legislative interim committee assigned to study the problems of migrant farm workers and come up with legislative solutions.

THE INTERIM COMMITTEE

chaired by Willner, comprised of House and Senate members, produced a package of proposed improvements in the working, housing and health conditions of migrant workers, which the 1959 legislative session passed. Although Willner was defeated for re-election in 1958, he continued to chair the committee until it completed its work. A Democratic activist who lobbied for passage of the improvements in the lives of migrant workers was Vera Katz of Portland, who also picketed supermarkets in support of the California grape boycott initiated by Cesar Chavez, the leader of the United Farm Workers Union. Katz went on to a long career in elective office, which saw her serve as Speaker of the Oregon House and Mayor of Portland. Willner later served as the attorney for Cesar Chavez College in Woodburn. Willner returned to the Legislature by winning election to the Oregon Senate in 1962. He served for a decade as a state senator. In the 1970s, Willner sought the Democratic nomination for U.S. senator and Oregon attorney general.

In addition to previously mentioned labor unions, Willner also was the attorney for a number of other labor organizations, including Woodworkers Region 3 and Multnomah County Employees Local 88.

HE ALSO successfully represented Americans of Japanese descent in their quest for monetary redress for their internment in World War II, and he won pay equity justice for woman faculty members at Portland State and other state higher education institutions.

An accomplished tennis player, Willner is nationally ranked at 51st among those 80 or older.

DON HAS four daughters, Becky, who lives in London, Sarah, in California, Anna, in Maine, and Jennifer, who is a lawyer in Bellingham, Washington. He has eight grandchildren. Don's wife, Marjorie Burns, an author of non-fiction books, is secretary-treasurer of the faculty union at Portland State University.



DON WILLNER

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