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Interview with  
Raymond J. Gross  
April 6, 1974

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Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
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Oral History Collection

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Mr. Raymond Gross for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place in Arlington, Texas, on April 6, 1974. I am interviewing Mr. Gross in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was an employee of the WPA--the Works Progress Administration--back in the 1930's.

Mr. Gross, to begin this interview why don't you just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me where you were born, when you were born, your education, your present occupation. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Gross: Well, I was born in Owen County, Indiana, on June 6, 1896. I only went to elementary school. I got a diploma from the eighth grade and never went to high school. Back in those days they seldom ever did (chuckle). I was married in 1916. I was twenty years old about three months later. I worked various places, and just

before this WPA come on I was working in a stone mill in Bloomington, Indiana. I worked fifty hours a week, and I got a dollar an hour, and I got \$50. That didn't have any tax or anything. So on one Friday evening they came around, and they paid off and they says, "Now this is it."

Marcello: Now had you had any indication that this sort of thing was going to happen?

Gross: No, I didn't know at all. They said, "This is your last check." And the funny thing about it is that he said, "Now take it and spend it as quick as you can because that'll put the money back in circulation." You take anybody with four kids in school, and it didn't take you long to spend \$50. He didn't have to tell me that (chuckle).

Marcello: Now \$50 a week at that time was fairly good money, was it not?

Gross: Yes. Yes, that was good money.

Marcello: And as you mentioned, you had no prior warning at all that this sort of thing would happen.

Gross: No. No, I didn't.

Marcello: When did this occur? In what year?

Gross: I think in about 1930, maybe. I'm not sure. It was either '30 or '31.

Marcello: In other words, you would have been about thirty-five years old at the time, maybe.

Gross: That's right.

Marcello: How large was your family then?

Gross: Four.

Marcello: In other words, it was your wife and yourself and two children?

Gross: Three children.

Marcello: And three children.

Gross: Three girls and a . . . six in the whole family. That's four children and my wife and I.

Marcello: I see. What were your feelings when all of the sudden you were told by your boss that there was going to be no more work?

Gross: Well (chuckle), I can't explain that hardly because I was sort of let down.

Marcello: Was it a feeling of shame or guilt or anything of this nature?

Gross: No, it wasn't anything like that. I just knew that it was something that I couldn't help, so I just had to do the best I could do.

Marcello: I'm sure there was perhaps at least a little bit of comfort in the fact that other people were being laid off, too, and you weren't the only one.

Gross: The whole gang, everybody, went out at the same time.  
As we used to say, we were all in the same boat (chuckle).

Marcello: Or to use another expression, I guess, misery loves  
company (chuckle).

Gross: Yes (chuckle).

Marcello: That might be another way of putting it.

Gross: Well, then we went on, you know, like I told you. I  
worked out on the streets and got what we called "bean  
orders." They'd give us a little certificate, and tell  
us to go to the grocery and get so much groceries.  
They'd tell us, "You can't buy any cigarettes, and  
you can't have any candy for your kids, just beans  
and 'taters and that sort of thing."

Marcello: How long was it after you were laid off your job that  
you worked on this local relief project?

Gross: Well, it wasn't too awful long. They organized it  
there in Bloomington and set up certain people for  
supervisors. They had several gangs out, you know.  
Oh, we just went around and worked on the streets  
and stuff like that.

Marcello: In other words, this was a local project that was  
taking place in Bloomington, Indiana.

Gross: That's right.

Marcello: Which is where the university is located.

Gross: That's right, Indiana University.

Marcello: What sort of readjustment did you have to make in your way of life after you were laid off from this job?

Gross: Well, one thing I had to do, I was buying a home, and we had to give that up amongst the thousands of other people that had to. As I said, my father-in-law had this grocery and he helped me. If he hadn't helped me, why, we'd have never made it, I don't think. I don't know how we would have made it.

I just remember one instance when I was working out on these street gangs, my children all had diptheria. And just to show you how people will help you in times like this, they wouldn't let me out to go to work, so the men that I worked with, they worked about a half an hour each that week in order for me to get my allowance. So this shows you that when you get thrown into something like that, I think people sort of helps each other more, realize it more, than you do when you're going along in pretty good shape.

Marcello: In other words, this was a rather common thing during that period. Neighbors and friends would help one another.

Gross: That's right, yes.

Marcello: I'm sure that in hard times like that you see the best and the worst in people coming out, do you not?

Gross: Yes, you do.

Marcello: What was the economic state of Bloomington in general? Now I'm assuming that you were living in Bloomington at this time.

Gross: That's right. Well, I don't know. Everybody was just about in the same shape. Nobody had any money. We just did the best we could do.

Marcello: How tough was it to get a job on this local relief project?

Gross: Not too bad. Of course, in a community like that the supervisors know most people. They knew about everybody. You didn't have to go tell them your history or anything. They knew me and knew what I needed, and it was no trouble to get on.

Marcello: How many hours did you work on this local relief project?

Gross: Oh, I think we worked three or four days a week.

Marcello: Was that an eight-hour day?

Gross: Yes.

Marcello: Do you remember how much . . . oh, you mentioned awhile ago that you got paid in kind rather than in money.

Gross: It was about \$4 a week, \$4.50, something like that.

Marcello: In other words, at the end of the week you could buy approximately \$4 or \$5 worth of groceries.

Gross: That's right, yes.

Marcello: I would assume that the local resources were rather limited, and this job could not have continued indefinitely.

Gross: Yes, that's right. I don't know where they got the money to give us our groceries. I don't know where that came from. I never did hear . . . some civic group or somebody, I suppose, got together and furnished it.

Marcello: What seemed to be the general attitude of the local people, or more specifically your neighbors, towards these hard times. In other words, did they feel bitter towards somebody, or couldn't they understand the whole situation? Exactly how did they feel?

Gross: I don't know how they felt, but I didn't feel bitter. I just accepted it, and as I said, I just done the best I could do with it.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that you lost your home. I shouldn't say you lost your home, but you at least had to move out of your home because of the fact you no longer had steady employment.



Gross: They repossessed it.

Marcello: How about your bank account? Did you have to lean back on your savings or anything of this nature during this period?

Gross: No, we didn't. Oh, we had a little checking account, but it didn't last too long. When you're not putting anything in it, it don't take long to go out (chuckle).

Marcello: How did the banks fair through this period? In a lot of the sections of the country the banks failed.

Gross: Well, there was a lot of them . . . I know . . . the Bloomington banks, I think, was all . . . they all survived, but you'd read about it all over the country where they was going out of business pretty fast.

Marcello: In other words, the bank failures didn't affect you too much because you didn't have too much money in the bank.

Gross: That's right. There was a big bank in Indianapolis, I think, called the Washington Trust Company. I lived in a new addition, and they financed the whole thing. They had a lot of property on their hands (chuckle). I don't know how they come out on it.

Marcello: I would assume that in a lot of cases banks really didn't want to repossess that property because they couldn't sell it to anybody else anyhow.

Gross: No. They just had to hold it until things got going again. I guess that'd be all right if you had the money to do it (chuckle), but if you'd take in a whole bunch like that and it takes some money.

Marcello: In 1932 Franklin Roosevelt was elected President. What did that mean to you? What sort of changes did you see taking place between the time that Hoover was President and when Franklin Roosevelt came in? Maybe I should preface that question first of all by asking what your politics are?

Gross: Well, I'm a Democrat (chuckle).

Marcello: Okay, we'll start from that point then.

Gross: I'm not scared to tell anybody. One of the first things that I could tell you about between Roosevelt and Hoover is that Hoover was in there four years, and he kept promising that prosperity was just around the corner, you know. But when Roosevelt came in, he did something about it, and it didn't take him long to do it.

Marcello: In a lot of cases I'm sure you weren't positive exactly what Roosevelt was doing, but he was doing something.

Gross: That's right. I've read and heard where he would have a project in mind, and he'd try it out on some little

thing to see if it'd work out first. And if it worked out on a little scale, then he'd put it into effect. So you could see there that he wasn't just going into something blind. He knew what he was doing before he took it.

Marcello: Did you listen to the fireside chats with any degree of regularity?

Gross: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Describe what those fireside chats were like.

Gross: Oh, I was always looking forward to them! He had a dog named Fala. I remember one of them very distinctly. He was making his talk, and he said, "Now they've talked about me, and they've talked about my family," and he says, "I've took that pretty well," but he says, "Now they're talking about my little dog," and he said, "I don't like it!" (chuckle).

Marcello: (chuckle) Was this almost a type of social occasion when you knew one of these fireside chats was going to be given over the radio? In other words, did everybody kind of gather around the radio and listen?

Gross: Yes. Oh, yes, we always knew when he was coming on.

Marcello: I've often heard it said that it almost sounded as though Roosevelt were talking directly to the listener

when those fireside chats were taking place. Was this your idea?

Gross: Yes, that's true. Yes. He was a . . . well, the way I had him pictured he was a millionaire. He didn't need anything from anybody, but he was for the people that did need something. And he put it into effect.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that if nothing else Roosevelt more or less inspired confidence or hope?

Gross: I think so because just as soon as he got in we could see that he was doing something. And the fact is that he was elected four times, so I think that that pretty well answered that question, don't you?

Marcello: It sure does. Now at the time of Roosevelt's election, I assume that you were still working on this local relief project, and did you continue to work on that local relief project up until WPA came into being?

Gross: Yes, sir. When WPA came in . . . all this time I was working in the Democratic Party. We had a Democratic club there in Monroe County, and I was the secretary to the club. So when this was instituted, this WPA, and when they had to get their personnel for that, the county Democratic chairman recommended me for WPA paymaster and timekeeper for the county. And that's how I come to get the job.

Marcello: In other words, most of the WPA appointments, or at least the administrative appointments, usually came through recommendations from the county Democratic chairman.

Gross: That's right, that is, the personnel part of the offices around the county.

Marcello: And, of course, on the other hand the WPA workers that actually were out on the pick-and-shovel jobs, they were certified by the United States Employment Service, I believe, were they not?

Gross: I believe so, yes.

Marcello: And I think they had to demonstrate need.

Gross: Yes. But there wasn't any . . . as we would say, they didn't play any politics out there because everybody got to work. But the ones that handled the jobs in the office, they was recommended by the Democratic county chairman.

Marcello: Now the WPA got started in 1935, and is this when you were also first employed by the WPA? Do you recall what year you started working for the WPA?

Gross: No, I don't. Must have been '35 because I remember one incident that the . . . the WPA, when that came on, we had a system where when we kept the time, we had a work time and a wet time, we called it, you know.

If somebody come out and reported that it was raining, and he couldn't work, we'd mark them present and they'd get paid. And the thing I remember about it was that in 1936 we had a winter that was just the worst. It was zero for maybe a month and a foot of snow on, and I know that those people come out and reported every morning, and we paid them for every day and they never worked a lick all the time. And I can remember that was '36, so I started in '35, I think, around . . . seemed to me around July or August, sometime around there.

Marcello: That stands to reason because the WPA came into existence in around May of 1935, but then it took them most of June, July, and August to get the administrative machinery set up and got the whole program operating at that time. How'd you find out about the WPA?

Gross: Well, we knew it was coming. It was all over the papers.

Marcello: In other words, would they usually advertise something like this--that this government agency was going to be established and that you could find employment there if you qualified?

Gross: Yes, we all knew it was coming before it ever started. When they started picking their personnel and everything,

by me being in there as secretary of the club and everything, I think that's what gave me a lead on that.

Marcello: In other words, being a good Democrat and a fairly high ranking Democrat in the county organization gave you a certain advantage toward getting a job in the WPA. Who was the county Democratic chairman?

Gross: Robert E. Myers.

Marcello: And what county are we talking about?

Gross: Monroe County, Indiana.

Marcello: How many people would you say were employed in the WPA in your particular locality? You'd have to estimate this, of course.

Gross: Well, I would now. They worked them all over the county in gangs. You see, we had a foreman and a timekeeper on every gang. And I don't know, but I think we had fifteen gangs or something or maybe more. And they'd have, oh, twenty-five or thirty on a gang. It was four or five hundred, probably, all over the county.

Marcello: Now in relation to your job as timekeeper, would you be right out there with that gang as they were working on that project, or were you back in a county headquarters?

Gross: I'm back in the office. But these county timekeepers out there, they was under my supervision. I would go out and check with them and things like that. And then when the payroll was supposed to be made up, they would bring the payroll into the office to me. And our district office was in Vincennes, and I would take it into the office each month.

Marcello: As I recall, you had the national WPA in Washington, of course, under Harry Hopkins, and then the national was broken down into regions, and then the regions were broken down into districts, and then the districts, I guess, were actually broken down into counties.

Gross: Well, Vincennes was around seventy-five miles from . . . but that was our district there. We had to work out of that office there.

Marcello: And is that where you yourself worked, in Vincennes? Or did you just continue . . .

Gross: No, I was in Bloomington.

Marcello: In Bloomington.

Gross: The only time I was in Vincennes was when I'd take the payroll down to them, and they'd check the payroll, and then the checks would be mailed back to me in Bloomington.

Marcello: What were your wages on that WPA job?



Gross: Mine?

Marcello: Yes.

Gross: I got \$160 a month and I had to furnish my car, too, to drive around all over the county and to Vincennes and back. They'd give me so much salary and allowed me so much for gas. But it added up to \$160.

Marcello: I would assume that was a fairly good salary at that particular time, comparatively speaking.

Gross: I was right up in the money then (chuckle). The people who worked out on the highway, they got \$44 a month. And that's . . . as I said, they got dry time and wet time. They got that much regardless of whether they worked or whether they didn't. They knew that when payday would come, they was going to get \$44.

Marcello: How did that \$44 a month compare with what they could make in private industry?

Gross: Well, it wasn't as much as they could make, but at that time you could buy a lot more groceries for a dollar than you could after everybody got back to work.

Marcello: Also, was it not true that they deliberately kept WPA wages fairly low so this would encourage people to go back into private industry when jobs did open up?

Gross: That's right; I think so.

Marcello: In other words, if those WPA wages competed with the wages that one would receive in private industry, you may never have gotten people off of those relief rolls.

Gross: No. No, they'd have stayed right on there because they'd get paid for about half the time without doing anything.

Marcello: Well, besides that, it was a steady job. They were assured of getting paid. I would assume by this time that a lot of people were pretty suspicious about taking employment in private industry again.

Gross: For another thing, they might not have had to work quite as hard out there as they did in private industry.

Marcello: What was your observations of WPA workers in general?

Gross: You mean the ones out on the field or on the roads?

Marcello: Let's take the ones out on the field and on the projects first of all.

Gross: Well, one thing about . . . the way I felt about them, there was a lot of those men out there on the road that I worked with in town, and I was one of them. And just because I got a better job than they did, I didn't feel I was any better than they was. I've had

people from the Vincennes office come up to me, and there would be people that would come off the road wanting to see me about something. And they'd say, "Now don't let him in this office, he's . . ." Well, I said, "Well, anybody that works out there can come in this office anytime he wants to as long as I'm here." Because I said, "That's my old buddy out there, and I'm going to help him to the end."

Marcello: Sometimes, then, I gather that there was, shall we say, a certain amount of snobbishness on the part of the administrative employees toward the pick-and-shovel people.

Gross: That's right. Sure. Those people down there . . . I didn't see it that way myself. I finally lost my job there, too, just because I didn't high-hat anybody, you might say (chuckle).

Marcello: We'll talk about that in a minute. That sounds like a pretty interesting story in itself. Could you estimate what the average length of time was that a person stayed on the WPA rolls? Now, again, I'm referring to the pick-and-shovel people down on the projects.

Gross: No, I wouldn't know. I wouldn't have any idea about that.

Marcello: Could you estimate what the average age of the typical WPA employee was?

Gross: Well, as you said awhile ago, I was around thirty-five. It might have been a little more than that. I would say around forty, maybe. Of course, there was some pretty older people on there.

Marcello: I would assume that most of the younger males, especially those that were unmarried, had gone into the CCC.

Gross: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of skills did these WPA workers have?

Gross: Well, they didn't have much skill of any kind. Now there was a project after that where they allotted some money at the Indiana University. And these people built some buildings out there. They were bricklayers and things like that. But that didn't come under the same thing when I was working.

Marcello: In other words, we're talking mainly about unskilled workers on these WPA projects.

Gross: Yes, that would be it.

Marcello: How were the foremen selected? I would assume that every one of these projects had a foreman.

Gross: Well, he was selected a little bit the same way that I was, you know--through the chairman.

Marcello: In other words, the project foreman was usually selected through the Democratic county chairman, also.

Gross: That's right. Most of those belonged to the club that I was the secretary of, see. So we knew everybody.

Marcello: What was the name of this Democratic club?

Gross: Monroe County Association of Democratic Clubs. I even sent President Roosevelt a membership card (chuckle).

Marcello: Is that right (chuckle)? Did you get any sort of return from him?

Gross: I got an answer from one of his secretaries on it. But we sent him a card.

Marcello: How powerful was this Democratic club in the county?

Gross: Well, it was pretty powerful for a good while. Then it got to be a faction in the county between . . . you know, when somebody is in certain places, there is always somebody wanting to knock him off and get in himself. They worked on that for a long time, and they finally got the job done.

Marcello: In other words, after awhile factions within the Democratic Party developed, and there was a type of rivalry that took place.

Gross: Right.

Marcello: Would you say that most of these WPA workers were conscientious about the job that they were doing?

Gross: I think they were. Just for one instance there, I remember the first time that I got my checks and went out to pay the men. And I never will forget this old fellow. I don't remember his name, but I had handed his check for \$44, and he says, "Now where should I go to spend it?" And I said, "Mister, you worked for that money, so you spend it anywhere you want to spend it." And I never will forget the looks in his eyes. It was the most grateful look I think I've ever seen! So I think he appreciated it a lot. He'd been used to getting those what we called the "bean orders," you know, and they'd tell him where to go for his groceries. But when I told him, "You buy what you want, anywhere you want." It was (chuckle) just worth it to see how he looked.

Marcello: Did you ever hear anybody griping because the wages weren't higher?

Gross: No. Everybody knew what they were going to be, I guess, and (chuckle) after doing without so long, you were tickled to death to get it.

Marcello: Did the WPA employ very many women?

Gross: Well, I think we had a sewing project or something there that some of them worked in.

Marcello: How about in the district office, or in the county

office with which you were associated with? Were there any women working in that office?

Gross: Yes, we had a telephone operator there and a secretary. I think there was about three women in there. Then the superintendent of the whole thing, Mr. Young, he was the county overseer, and then I was under him. Hadley Young was his name. I don't even remember where he was from now, but he wasn't a local man.

Marcello: I would assume that generally speaking the WPA was interested in employing first of all men with families.

Gross: Yes.

Marcello: And perhaps if there were any jobs left over, maybe single women would receive those jobs or something of this nature in an office, let's say, doing stenographic work or clerical work or something of this nature.

Gross: Yes.

Marcello: But in your office there were very, very few women employed.

Gross: No. I think we had about three in there is all.

Marcello: How great a problem was absenteeism on WPA jobs?

Gross: Well, it wasn't too bad. As I told you, the way they done me, you know, a lot of times if there's a man

sick or something, they would make up a little time and give it to him so he would get his money, too.

Marcello: But at the same time were there ever very many cases of people who simply didn't show up for work whether they were sick or not?

Gross: No, I don't think so. We didn't have much trouble like that. Everybody was there.

Marcello: What recourse would you have if somebody had been continually absent from his job?

Gross: Well, I don't suppose I would have took care of that. That would have been Mr. Young's job, you know. All I'd have had to have done was just show him my payroll and tell him how much they'd been off. And it'd be up to him to dismiss them if he wanted them off.

Marcello: Sometimes the critics used to refer to the WPA as "We Poke Along." Do you think that particular connotation was justified or not?

Gross: No, I don't think so.

Marcello: Let's talk very briefly about your particular job then. You mentioned that you were a timekeeper. And actually you were the more or less the supervisory timekeeper in that you had several timekeepers on the projects working under you.

Gross: Yes, probably fifteen or so. My title was supervising



timekeeper and paymaster. That was the title they gave me.

Marcello: Now exactly what were your duties?

Gross: Well, as I said, we had about maybe fifteen or so gangs. Well, down in the Vincennes office they would type up the payroll on a master payroll, alphabetically. When they'd bring their time in, they'd tell me what gang he was on. Of course, I usually knew the foreman. And I'd have to go over that payroll and lay these sheets out and each man whose name was there, I'd have to write on the payroll right after that, I'd put his gang number. And then when the checks come back, I'd have to assort the checks in the gangs, see. So I'd take them out and give them to . . . if I hadn't put those numbers down, I wouldn't have known where to put them. I had the whole county in just one stack of checks. And I had to sort them all out and give each foreman those for his men.

Marcello: I gather then that the workers were paid on the job. They did not have to come to your office or anything of this nature?

Gross: No. I took the checks out on the job and gave it to the foreman, and he paid the men right there.

Marcello: How often were the men paid?

Gross: I think it was once a month. I believe it was. But when this gang . . . the timekeepers would come in, and I got the time made up, then I would take it to Vincennes, and they would check it while I was there because if there was anything wrong with it, well, while I was there they could tell me and I could probably straighten it out.

Marcello: What particular qualifications did you have for this job?

Gross: (chuckle) I didn't have anything except common sense, I suppose you'd call it.

Marcello: I just had wondered if you had done any work similar to this or if you had been in any sort of office work, let's say, before you had been employed with WPA.

Gross: No. No. I worked in a stone mill. But all my life I've always been pretty good in figures, you know. That was my long suit in school. And my son's the same way (chuckle). He's a wizard in figures. Filing and stuff like that just sort of came natural to me, I guess.

Marcello: Well, let's talk then a little bit about the WPA projects in your locality. And I would assume that generally speaking you were working in Bloomington, in that general area.

Gross: We were all over the county.

Marcello: In Monroe County.

Gross: All in Monroe County, yes.

Marcello: What types of projects were the WPA undertaking in that particular county? In other words, can you be specific about some of the types of projects that were being undertaken?

Gross: Yes, they had a lot of projects where they repaired the roads and things. And then they had a project they called "the low log dam." And they'd go out in a big valley and they'd dam it up and make lakes all over the county. They had some wonderful projects. And that was one of the good projects to families-- to have all these lakes around. But I think that most of them was repair on roads and things like that.

Marcello: Were there ever any . . . I know for one thing in a lot of towns the WPA laid a lot of sewage lines and things of this nature. Was there very much of this done in your area?

Gross: I don't remember. We had some gangs in town, but I don't just remember what they did do.

Marcello: But most of these were going out into the county and engaging in road repair work and building these low log dams or what did you call it?

Gross: Low log dams.

Marcello: Low log dams.

Gross: I remember one thing they did there in the town was that they built a new jail. They had people working on that. It's still there.

Marcello: Over the long run would you say that most of these WPA projects were worthwhile? Or were they of the leaf-raking variety?

Gross: Well, I think that a lot of them was worthwhile. Of course, they had others like the leaf-raking thing. You just couldn't give them men their money without them doing something. But the most of them was worthwhile jobs.

Marcello: You mentioned these dams awhile ago and the fact that the WPA built a lot of lakes. I assume that these were relatively small lakes.

Gross: Well, they wasn't too big. Some of them . . . right now, a lot of people have got cabins all around them now, and they go out there in the summer. They filled them all with fish and all that sort of thing.

Marcello: In other words, a lot of these lakes are still being used today yet.

Gross: Yes, they're used today.

Marcello: And they are big enough that people can have cabins around them, and they can fish and, I assume, go boating on them.

Generally speaking, how were the sponsors chosen for these projects? Now as I recall, every WPA project had to have a sponsor--either a county government or a municipal government or something of this nature. Who, generally speaking, was the sponsor of the projects that you're familiar with?

Gross: Well, I wouldn't really know because the first I ever knew of the project, they had it all set and sent down to us already typed up and everything. They had their numbers and all that sort of thing, all their work numbers and everything. And I didn't know anything about who set it up or who was caused to set it up or anything. The first thing I knew was that they just laid it in on our desk and said this is the next project. And I don't know how it come about.

Marcello: And is it not true that the WPA would approve projects where the labor costs were high and the material costs were low? Wasn't this more or less one of the criteria that they used?

Gross: I think so, yes.

Marcello: In other words, they wanted to employ as many people as possible so they wanted high labor costs. As I recall, the sponsor had to supply the material costs.

Gross: That might be true. In the case of the jail, the county probably had to buy their material, and then the WPA furnished the labor. I knew they furnished the labor because I paid the men (chuckle).

Marcello: How were the contractors selected? Now a lot of times, of course, I would assume they tried to bring in local contractors to supervise these projects. How were they selected?

Gross: I don't know that because that was all set up, you know, before I would get the word about it. I don't know how they done that, but they would have to have something like that. Like the jail, they would have to have some building man to know what was going on.

Marcello: Well, this is what I was wondering because we mentioned awhile ago that the WPA was using unskilled labor. Now somebody had to have some sort of skills in order to supervise these people.

Gross: These people who were laying those bricks and things, they couldn't read blueprints. They had to have somebody there that would tell them what to do next. I

don't know how they got their contractor. But where they had contractors all around there in the county, they probably picked them, but I don't know who did it.

Marcello: Well, awhile ago we were talking about the foremen of these projects, and I would assume that even though they were selected by the county Democratic chairman, they probably had to have some sort of skills, did they not?

Gross: Well, yes, on some of the projects. Of course, out on the county roads and things like that, they didn't have to know too much, have too much skill, but on certain projects they had to get . . . we had people that had been draftsman and all sorts of things like that, and they was working, too.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit more about the role of politics in the WPA. I might just tell you that I did my doctoral dissertation on the WPA in North Carolina, and I was particularly interested in the political aspects of the WPA. In the next segment of this interview why don't we talk about the role that politics played in the WPA? First of all, who controlled the patronage that was connected with the WPA in your county?

Gross: Well, the county chairman, I suppose. That's the way I got my job. I think he was the man that had the last say on it.

Marcello: Who was your county chairman?

Gross: Robert E. Myers.

Marcello: Robert E. Myers, and we talked about him awhile ago.

Gross: He owned a candy and tobacco store, the Monroe County Tobacco Store, wholesale. We'd all go down to Bob's and chat around with him. He was the big boy in our club.

Marcello: Do you know if he worked very closely with any of the local politicians or with the United States representative from that particular area?

Gross: No, I don't. I did know that he was a personal friend of Paul McNutt, our former governor.

Marcello: He became one of the leading Democrats in the Roosevelt administration.

Gross: Yes. Mr. McNutt was the dean of the law school at Indiana University, and him and Bob Myers were real good friends when they was elected. And there was another fellow named Hitchcock that was . . . he was Mr. McNutt's personal manager or something when he was elected. He was an insurance man there.



Marcello: And Myers also was closely associated with Mr. Hitchcock.

Gross: Yes.

Marcello: How many Republicans held administrative positions in the WPA in Monroe County?

Gross: Well, there wasn't any if we knew it (chuckle). I knew everybody pretty well, and if somebody'd come in . . . and, of course, this Mr. Young, he didn't know anybody there. He was from out of there. So if we'd go out and I'd see somebody that wasn't on our side, I'd tell him. Of course, I didn't fire him myself (chuckle), but he could fire him if he wanted to.

Marcello: Now again, we're referring to people who held administrative jobs. Now quite obviously one's political affiliation was not supposed to have made any difference on the projects themselves.

Gross: No, not out there, but if he was a foreman or something like that . . . well, if he was a foreman he could go back to work like the other boys (chuckle).

Marcello: But all of the administrative jobs were kept by Democrats.

Gross: That's right.

Marcello: And I think we need to mention here that if the Republicans had been in power in the county, they would have done the same thing so far as Republicans were concerned.

Gross: Sure would.

Marcello: This was simply the way the game was played.

Gross: Yes, we wouldn't have gotten a look in.

Marcello: Who was the local congressman in your particular area?  
Do you recall?

Gross: I believe it was Arthur Greenwood about that time,  
Arthur Greenwood from Washington, Indiana.

Marcello: And do you know if he took a very active interest in  
the activities of the WPA here?

Gross: I don't really know. I don't think he did too much.  
I knew him only just when I'd see him. I never talked  
to him.

Marcello: Did Mr. Myers hold any political office other than the  
fact that he was county Democratic chairman?

Gross: No.

Marcello: How about local politicians? Did they play an active  
role in the WPA? I'm referring now to those who actually  
held some elected office, let's say a mayor or a county  
commissioner or somebody of this nature.

Gross: I don't even remember who was the mayor. I know the  
mayor who went in just after that was Republican.  
But I don't remember who the mayor was then. But I  
don't think they didn't play too much of a part in it,  
I don't think.

Marcello: Now you mentioned, of course, that all of the administrative jobs were held by Democrats. Also, previously, you mentioned that as time went on certain factional struggles developed within the Democratic organization itself. Why don't you talk about that a little bit, and explain how it came about and how it affected WPA jobs.

Gross: Well, there was some people there named East. He was county auditor, and he had a son that he wanted to be chairman of the Democratic Party. They just kept digging in on us, you know, till they got a new man in the Vincennes office.

Marcello: The Vincennes office of the WPA?

Gross: Yes. That was over us. Well, as soon as he got in there, I could begin to see what he was going to work up to, see. So he was going to bump off all the men that was from our faction and put in the other side. Of course, they'd be Democrats, but they wouldn't be the original ones like we had. And they worked on it awhile, and they began to putting pressure on me. If I'd make one little mistake, why . . . anything that used to be overlooked, why, they'd make an issue out of it. So they finally come around one day sort of

like they did at the stone mill and told me that they was going to make some changes. Well, I knew it was coming, but I didn't know when. And if I wanted to work, I could go out on one of those gangs and be a timekeeper. I told them I wasn't interested in it. So I got let out.

Then I was out for a while, and there was an old man that worked on the gangs. He was a pretty good friend of mine. He come up to my house one night, and he said, "They told me to come up here and tell you that if you stay away from Bob Myers and quit going down there and talking to him, that we'd give you a job." Of course, I didn't know exactly who it was, but I knew what faction it was. And I'm going to tell you just what I told him (chuckle). I said, "You go back and tell that guy that sent you up here to go straight to hell because I'm going to talk to Bob Myers or anybody else that I want to anytime I want to!" So I didn't get no job (chuckle). So that's the way it ended up with me.

Marcello: What was the basis of this factional dispute? Was it simply a case of the "ins" versus the "outs?" In other words, one faction wanted to control the Democratic

organization and in the process would have to get rid of the other faction.

Gross: That's right. They didn't like the county chairman. And instead of cooperating with him and trying to get along until they could have a change, they wanted to kick him out right now. And they just kept working around until they got the job done.

Marcello: And the county chairman was Myers? And he was also the head of this Democratic club?

Gross: No, we had a president and a secretary of that. But he was the one that organized it.

Marcello: Myers is the one who organized this club. What was the function of this club? How did it operate?

Gross: Oh, we had meetings every month. If something come up that we thought was a good deal, we'd put our pressure on it, and we got a lot of things through like that. There was a lot of people who belonged to that club.

Marcello: About how big would you say it was altogether?

Gross: Oh, maybe 150 people or more. They all just chipped in a quarter apiece, and I kept the money, and if we wanted, why, I had the money and we'd go do it.

Marcello: What sort of things would this be?

Gross: Oh, I don't know. We just fought for certain things around the county that we thought was good for the

public. I don't know if we was the cause of it going through, but we put some pressure on it, and I know it was a help to get it through.

Marcello: What was your job as secretary of this organization?

Gross: Well, I kept the minutes of the meetings, and I collected the money and issued a card to anybody that wanted to join. I'd issue them a card and put my name and the president's name on it.

Marcello: And I gather that being a member of this club was one of the keys to getting a job on the WPA.

Gross: Yes. And by keeping all those records and things, it'd give me a little experience, too, for when I got the job.

Marcello: How great a role did politics play in the location of the projects? Do you know anything at all about this?

Gross: No, I wouldn't know anything about that.

Marcello: In other words, let me put it to you this way. Let's say that there was a certain town that had a Republican mayor. Would that town, perhaps, have had a harder time having a WPA project located there than a town next to it that had a Democratic mayor?

Gross: Well, I wouldn't know because there was only one town in Monroe County that had a mayor and that was

Bloomington. We had some little towns, but they just had town boards, trustees or boards. But we never had that thing come up.

Marcello: As long as you were timekeeper on the WPA, did you also continue your function as secretary of this Democratic club?

Gross: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Was there ever any conflict of interest between the two?

Gross: No. I remember one time there was a man that come in there and wanted to see me, and the girl told him I was busy, and he pulled that membership card out there and said, "Take that in there." And she give that to me (chuckle), and he said, "I knew that would bring you out." He maybe thought it would help him a little there, too.

Marcello: From time to time the WPA was also quite active when elections came. Were there ever any pressures put upon workers to vote for a particular candidate come election time, either at the administrative level or down at the pick-and-shovel level?

Gross: Yes, they had come to me, people had, and would want me to tell them what I wanted them to do. I never did tell them what to do. There was a few cases I

told them what I was going to do, and I knew by that what they did do. But I didn't say, "You do this or you do that." They'd say, "Do you want me to vote for him or him?" I'd say, "Well, now you vote for who you want to, but I'm going to vote for him." And that was the way I handled that. I wasn't going to tell nobody what they had to do.

Marcello: In other words, you mentioned awhile ago that you were more or less asked or told to work for a particular candidate. Who was the person who would usually approach you? Would it be Myers as county Democratic chairman?

Gross: Well, I think the club a lot of times sort of sponsored some of them. Of course, we knew that no bigger than that county was, we knew who they were anyway. You didn't have to tell us who it was because we always knew it.

Marcello: Now it is also said that when election time came around, one could usually see a marked increase in the number of people employed by the WPA. What was the case in your particular county?

Gross: I don't think so there. I think we was pretty steady, just about average all the way through. You know, we didn't hire extra people at times like that.



Marcello: Were there ever any cases of people being blacklisted because they belonged to, let's say, the opposition party--Republicans in this case--or because they belonged to the rival faction within the Democratic Party or because they had voted wrong or anything of this nature?

Gross: Well, I don't know for sure, but it could have been. Of course, that would have been a case of the supervisor and the county chairman getting together. I wouldn't have anything in that, see.

Marcello: Were you ever solicited for campaign contributions while you were working on this WPA job?

Gross: No, I wasn't.

Marcello: Do you know of any cases where this was ever done, let's say, among the workers or anything of this nature?

Gross: Not that I know of. I never heard of it.

Marcello: What seemed to be the general attitude of the public towards the WPA?

Gross: Well, I thought it was pretty good because that was a good project, and they knew it was doing some good. Well, of course, I don't care what you'd put up, somebody is going to kick about it. But then it was . . . I think the majority was for it.

Marcello: Whenever there was criticism, do you feel that in most cases it was political in nature, that is, usually were the Republicans the ones that were doing the criticizing?

Gross: Yes, I would think it would be,

Marcello: What particular direction would their criticisms take? In other words, did they consider the WPA workers to be boondogglers and things of this nature?

Gross: Yes, we were just doling out the money, and they weren't earning it and something like that [sarcasm]. You know the trouble, I think, with a lot of people and a lot of projects is that there's always somebody criticizing you for what you do. But they can't tell you anything to do that's better. They don't have any ideas themselves, but you're not right, but they don't know how to do it either. So if I can't do it better than you, I'll just keep quiet about it.

Marcello: How do you think that the local economy benefited as a result of the WPA?

Gross: Well, I think it did a lot of good. A lot of people would have come down with starvation. Whenever you'd go in there with a check and give the cash for something . . . now I don't know who paid for these groceries

that we got on these tickets we got. But when you walked in there with a check and lay down the money, why, that was a lot better. I don't care who paid for it.

Marcello: In other words, the local merchants, among other people, certainly benefited because of the WPA.

Gross: That's right.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that perhaps it might be a little easier to buy things on credit if the merchant knew that you were a WPA employee?

Gross: Yes, it sure would. Because before, you didn't have any guarantee at all.

Marcello: In other words, the merchants were sure that that check was going to be coming in and that it would be there.

Gross: That's right, yes. And we knew that it was coming in if you worked there or if you didn't work there. That was one thing that they were sure of.

Marcello: How did the WPA benefit you personally?

Gross: Well (chuckle), it took me off of the shovel and put me in an office for one thing. Of course, it didn't do everybody like that, but everybody couldn't be in the office. I was just lucky.

Marcello: What did this do for your dignity? In other words, here you'd been without a job, and now all of a sudden you have one.

Gross: Well, it made me feel real good. And one thing, I don't know what you would say, but I was a pretty popular guy after I got that job because I'd start from my house for the office, and a lot of times I'd be stopped eight or ten times before I'd get to the office. Everybody in the county knew I was the guy that handled the money, and they all wanted to talk to me (chuckle).

Marcello: How much influence did you possibly have in getting people jobs in the WPA?

Gross: Well, I didn't have . . . that wasn't my part of it, see. Of course, if I'd have knew somebody that I thought needed it and I'd said something to them, they would listen to me, I think.

Marcello: In other words, you could put in a recommendation for somebody that . . .

Gross: Yes. Of course, I could play it kind of cool, you know. If I really wanted him on there, I could say, "Okay, put him on." And then if I didn't, I could say or tell him that I didn't have anything to do with it (chuckle).

Marcello: How did the lifestyle of your family change as a result of having this WPA job? Now here you had been working at this . . . I would call it a stone quarry. Is that what it was?

Gross: Yes, a stone mill.

Marcello: A stone mill. All of a sudden you were cut off of your job, which was a pretty good one. Then you went to work on this local relief project in Bloomington. And then, of course, you went on the WPA where you were making well over a hundred dollars a month. Now how did the lifestyle of your family change again?

Gross: Well, as I said at the start, my father-in-law, he kept us. If my kids needed a pair of shoes, they got them and something. We had everything we really needed. But the only change I could see is that I could do it myself instead of having somebody else do it for me.

Marcello: Incidentally, where did you start to live now? We mentioned at the beginning of the interview that you had lost your original home or the home that you were buying. Where did you move to?

Gross: Well, back then you could buy a home on a contract, or you could . . . see, when I bought this home down there, I owned one, and I put the equity in it, and I

got a deed. And in those days--I don't know how it is now--if you were on a contract and you missed a couple of payments you're out. If you have a deed, you can live there a year, and they can't move you out for a year. Well, I stayed there for the year, and by that time I was sort of on my feet, and when I had to move out, I went out and rented a place. So that helped me there.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that eventually you lost your WPA job through this interfactional struggle that was taking place within the county Democratic organization and I suppose within this Democratic club, also. I gather that whoever controlled the Democratic club also controlled county politics?

Gross: Yes.

Marcello: How long had you been working with the WPA altogether before this took place? Could you estimate that?

Gross: I don't think I was there quite two years.

Marcello: What did you do after you were more or less dismissed from your WPA job?

Gross: Well, it wasn't very long after that until the postmaster, who was a Democrat, found out that . . . when I lived in Spencer, Indiana, before I went to

Bloomington, I was substitute mail carrier. And he was wanting a substitute mail carrier awful bad, and he heard that and he came and asked me if I would take it. Well, I did, and they put me on a route where a man had a . . . I guess it was a cancer. He was . . . oh, he lived maybe seven or eight months. But he couldn't work, and I had that whole time. It paid about \$350 a month. So by the time I got through with that, why, then things were going better, and I got going again.

Marcello: As you look back over your experiences in the WPA, do you think it was a good thing? In other words, suppose we had hard times like that again. Do you think that the organization of any agency like the WPA would be a good thing?

Gross: Well, the way I feel about it, the way we're going right now, if something like that would come along, I think it would bring the people closer together. Because now everybody is going real good, and they don't care what happens to you. Or they don't even know you. But if something was to happen that would throw us all together, you know, like that did, I think we'd be living more like we should live and would know each other and would help each other better.

Marcello: But do you think that if we were to have another depression that the establishment of a WPA-type organization would perhaps be a good thing?

Gross: Well, if we were down like we was then, I think that it would help bring us back. And I have said before now that if we have a depression now--the way things is going--that the one that we had then would just be a piker because the property I had then, I only gave about \$3,500, and now they're giving \$30,000 or \$40,000, and if they had to take back a bunch of them, that wouldn't even be a drop in the bucket. We'd really have a depression now.

Marcello: As a result of the depression, did you find yourself becoming more security-conscious? Is that a good way to place it, to mention it? In other words, you were worried perhaps about having a little bit of money in the bank and you always . . . in other words, how has the depression shaped your present day thinking about things?

Gross: Well, I think I've got a pretty good memory (chuckle), and I don't know . . . I think it's done me some good, myself, because if you go through that once, you don't want to go through again (chuckle). I mean especially when you were down as low as we was at the start of it.