Interview with Joseph Healy
9-30-98

RM: Could you give us a little background you are now, what department to do you work for on campus?

JH: Operations and maintenance, classification a senior tradesmen in the building trade shop.

RM: Ok, could you give us a little about how you came to Marquette, how you came to Northern and when you were employed and some of that background.

JH: Ok, I came here in from Chicago in late '67 and I started at Northern October 19th at the night shift as a custodian in the university center in '67. I got involved with the union in 1968 and I was elected as a steward

RM: What union was that?

JH: That was a scam

RM: What's that's stand for?

JH: American, Federation, of State county and municipal employees. Then I believe in September in '69 there was a vacancy for the vice president and I was appointed to that by the executive board of the union and then I ran for president in June of '70 for the local. Fran Beckler vice president had he was ready to step down a little bit. If he did not I would not have ran against him. So I guess this would be a good point to talk about Fran. Without Fran union would not be here.

RM: Could you also tie in how the union got started back in '65 and talk about Fran.

JH: When he asked me to collect the bargaining rights changed to affect because of the 1965 state constitution convention. I believe it is all heresy because I am not even from MI. And prior to that as a chapter in and that time they had the right to meet and confirm and management recognized me as the union representative for the group of employees which were cooks, custodians, grounds keepers and tradesmen. Pretty well covered. Security did not come into effect until '70 or '75 and I actually petitioned down into making it.

RM: So they are in your union?

JH: They are in the union that basically comprises the group to this day. But prior to '66 I believe according to Fran Beckler we were the first college and university to be recognized as unions for collective bargaining rights. I believe in Feb. of 1966 I believe he said "we beat Ferris State by two weeks". How long it

took to get that first agreement I do not know. First agreement with Northern was in July 1st, 1966. We signed collective bargaining and they ran basically one year until 1970 then they went two years and then three years. I was the president at that time. It was a concession. The negotiating every year took longer time so we went every three years but many event in the early days what we referred to as modified shop agreement where union had to actually go out and had the people pay there dues. There was no dues collection or anything else. And as I said what we were before a chapter an ask me chapter. That meeting we fell under the corrections officers. And I believe that is where they all met and the prison guard was also involved in that. It is possible that the county road commission before collecting the bargaining rights came in and it was popular they would come in and ask me and they would gain public membership in various public employee places but they would only be like the first group which might have been the corrections officers and then every other little group go over there and meet...

RM: They would attach then to the correctional..

JH: Yes, we would be chapter what the no, was or anything else I have no idea. But that is how Fran explained things to me. He would go down state to meet with the other colleges and universities trying to get this collective bargaining get going because they were counting on state constitution to give us the right. And so he was using his own money to go down because there was not any money so he said in order to get money he and to get it from corrections officers and they did not have it.For us anyway. As Fran had put it as what I understood, colleges and universities got the rights of bargaining civil service did not and the compromise in the state conventions was that the state colleges and universities and put in a clause that they had their own autonomy. That was important to them at that time. What they really meant I do not know. It may have been something to do with the some of the universities have board of region it may have I am guessing but supposedly they gave the rights to colleges and universities as long as they had a clause in the new constitutions that said they had autonomy. I guess right to run their own shop. So I guess that gets us into how the union got here prior to that Fran had actually got all started.

RM: Could you tell us about Fran? How do you spell his last name?

JH: I think it is Bleckler. But you can get it from personnel. Fran he world war two, he was a coast guardsmen and he worked for the railroad. He came to Northern and I believe that was in 1958 whether it was due to layoff or not enough work. He was maintenance mechanic what they called or for the university plumbing and all that.

RM: Electrical work or no?

JH: No. In the shops if you could do electrical we needed help but you ahead a classification in the shop like they would call you

plumbers, welders, pipe fitters, air conditioning, heating, ventilation, mechanical whatever. You had a classification if they say electrician needs a hand or the tin knockers need a ventilate. If you do it you did it. Just the same thing with the building shop painters were painters but you could build cabinets there is nothing to paint. So that is what Fran did for 28 years I believe he left in around '62-'63 he had a heart surgery and one year he was going to retire but he passed away before that. But Fran if it was not for Fran it is joke now we would not be in this mess. everybody is in the union now. Except the president. She does not need one. But Fran Bleckner was the one who started it all and used his own money and from then in like I said when I took over he did not get out of it he was on the board I believe but we would go down state and we had a college and university coordinating committee. He was a member of that committee he and I were the two members from Northern. He would go to our conventions and whenever I went downstate my first convention they sent me and another guy to get some young blood involved back then I believe it was in '69. and Fran did not go that convention first one he had not been to when all the years since he had been here. I went down there and everybody was where is Fran. He was important not only at the university level but at the state level too. Ask me at that time had five separate councils with certain jurisdiction. Northern belonged to council seven which covered jurisdictions of state colleges and universities and state civil services. Then there was council fifty five with the exception of state colleges and universities and civil services. As well as the city of Detroit which had its own separate council, ? county which had its own separate council, and a small of group of people in Flint which had its own separate council which was derived from may be early beginning which started out of Wisconsin. In some school district somewhere it grew from there I believe I'll try and find my book there's a book that's a good history called The Last Angry Man who if I'm not mistaken was the second international vice president he beat the guy who originally got it all going. That's got a good history I'm trying to find my book and that could give you an interesting history of public employment and ? which is now one of the largest unions in the country. Now ? only has one state council and that's council 25 we merged council 55 and council 7 into council 11 the international and the state of Michigan was trying to get rid of these five groups because we were fighting one another and wasting money and time and coverage political clout whatever. I think that took place somewhere in 1976 I believe. The council 55 and council 7 merger. The whole merger came together I believe in 1978 or 79 and I was a member of the original executive board so Frank ? founding father was getting old sitting there telling you dated so that is a little history of that.

RM: What are some of the problems that you faced as the president of the ? Are there any particular events or situations that you remember as the president of the union?

JH: Naturally back then I came here in '67.

RM: You came here when Harden was here?

JH: No, I just missed him. Basically when I came here the union and management the wages were not very good . That was no. One and only naturally management did not want a union when the union did come in the contract was very small and very basic but a 15 minute coffee break and 15 minute coffee break, they watched. And the ? community there really was not hatred for bosses or anything. He might be your next door neighbor, your kids go to school with their kids. The wages was a big thing, wages were very low and Northern's wages were lower than their counterparts down state. So that was one of the things that I was trying to bring that comparison from downstate and with the help of Dominique Jacobetti we were able to get some ? money up here which not ? I did a wage study it took a week of my vacation, I went downstate and drew up a wage comparison of all the colleges and universities. Then I brought it in front of Jacobetti and his group he the in charge of appropriations and out of that we got 200,000 dollars line item. We were hoping to get a 100,000 of that that's what I told Jacobetti that if we get hundred thousand we would be at the mean the state average some would still be above or below but I said if we could get at the average we wouldn't continually fall behind. Hopefully we stay there or move ahead out of that, they broke it up in clerical got some everybody out of that 200,000 everybody, we got about 40,000 we fell far short of what we wanted or what were hoping for so I have bad feelings about it of what happened at that time either here nor there but now the other thing, oh the other thing we had also dealing with wages was a step system they call an accruement increase. If you were hired as a custodian you were hired at a rate and there was nine steps before you get there to the top of that rate that classification so every year you would get a raise and then you'd get a dollar I believe that's what it was 1.90 an hour in the second year you'd go two dollars, plus any increase, but it would take nine years and one of the sayings at the time why does it take nine years to become a custodian? so

RM: It would take you nine years then to make another dollar an hour?

JH: Right another ninety cents, which is basically you will see today in clerical I believe still has it you see it when ever they post a job description minimum and a maximum within that group. We did away with it for first and foremost because it drag you down if management said ok we've got 5% that were gonna come up with that for the raises. Well a certain amount of that was already gone to take care of those anchorman see so after your here nine years you're actually gonna be getting less. So if we could close that gap then what I tried to explain. They did get rid of two steps in that first agreement. I think it went from nine in the first or second agreement they got rid of two but when it was then seven steps. When I got inducted it was one of the first things I wanted to do. I wanted to get rid of the steps system because of that. One the guys that were here X number of years they were gonna get less money. Two it when management when somebody retires or left

died they were usually making the top. They hire in at the bottom. So the total base for the group was smaller because of that but if we all made the same the base would be the same and economically I was trying to show the local because it wasn't that easy there were some that felt and I believe clerical feels this way to this day. I've been here longer I deserve to make more. Now we also have a longevity close in our agreement we are the only one who have it. Clerical used to but they gave it away. And I always told them never give away money. I used to fight and argue with clerical so many times. I met with them as a matter of fact I tried to help organize them and but they didn't pick us you see. The same thing with the faculty I used to meet with Green and Arnie Aho. Arnie Aho would use me as a guest speaker in his collective bargaining classes. As a matter of fact he is the one who's got my book. I called him up to ask him and he said right now my office is as cluttered as it was I could put my hands on it now its in a box somewhere. That was the basic thing was collective bargaining and trying to get the wage up there wasn't really the animosity that you hear about in some unions and I believe like I said because its a small community. Today the difference I see is of course economics is always there. This privatization which is a big, big issue at least with us ok. My feelings towards that are again we're a small community I don't think privatization will work because one your gonna hire say a janitorial service group he's only gonna do what you contract to give him. If you want something extra your gonna have to pay extra for it. It's just like if you hire a contractor to build a house you've gotta bid when anything outside that bid changes. He will do it but that's where he's really gonna make money, and you pay for it. I think few places have gone back. Food service has talked about it. Downstate it happened at Kellogg center which comes under MI state university they have ? of foods out there it was a contract the food was terrible the wages were terrible and this is a convention center if you have been there I have not been there since '78. Employees attitude was terrible. The other thing I am contracting up here is we are not like the ? why don't get a job somewhere else? not that many jobs available here this is not Detroit or where Central MI is they went through a that is the big issue now we have the privatization of the employees will hopefully convince Northern that the management it is the dollar figure as employees are concerned about Northern I know I am. Other economics I do remember a prison guard named Demarse got killed but his brother Hughly Demarse was a custodian here condition this was right after the prison riots were people were concerned. I used to go to membership meeting people would ask me and they will at that time also trying to get state collective bargaining and which did the state gave in and said collective bargaining to state they opened it up to who ever they asked me . When Demarse got killed we supported that local group we had and the ? group went on strike basically the afternoon shift was mostly acme people and when they came off work the acme group struck they put up sign, midnight shift was already in when the day shift came no body was crossing the line many of the belonged to other group like the corrections which is the biggest representative of MI corrections group. They were actually

not going to go in because they were mad too and event the leader supported that group and I was even quoted on the paper and got involved caravan and quoted as saying as ? prison guard and withholding of services from the university. Dr. Jamrich passed me in the hallway and he said I read your statement in the paper and I don't want to tell you what to do but you be careful striking in support of prison guards because he said go look up secondary ? . Dr. Jamrich and I were I think friends. I liked the man. He went through some difficult times here. You could always talk to him. That was my first lesson. Just because you are the president of the union at that time we had 239 people does not mean that you own this place. There were rules and regulations and little by little I learned about them but Dr. Jamrich gave me my first lesson. Then basically when the secondary boycotted we struck the prison guards might be able to work their issues out but were on the outside looking in. I'd say the boiler blew up the university could go after ask me local ask me international for our boiler. It's illegal to go on strike. That's one of the things that hurts us right now for public employees to go on strike. In the state of Michigan it's against the law. You'll get in the argument with groups the regular employees the first thing they'll bring up to you is teachers do it. They'll say yea where are you gonna get they say in 650 teachers in the Marquette school district with certificates and everything else. So that's apples and oranges. They can get plumbers, carpenters, cooks you know food service more readily. And because it is illegal it is an illegal strike you can't get the teamsters that would make the strike work you can't get that outside support because once its illegal. We did have that happen if you recall clerical went on a strike here probably 10 12 years ago. I believe they were out for 3 days. After the first day they were out they got a letter " you have 24 hours to return to work or your work will be terminated" Well clerical knows how important they are to this university because they do all the. A lot of faculty members would be lost.

RM: They also know were everything is at.

JH: Right A lot of things can't get done around here without them and they know that. And this is the point I try and make to our people is were in a little different ball game. Now years ago maybe we weren't. But when clerical was out at that time and to prove my point that I try and prove to the people about the illegalities. The boiler was being worked on at the time and there were concerns weathers coming on and they had to get it in the steam plant. They had to get this thing on line. And they had a I believe it was the welder that was in there and he's in there working alone. One of the steam plant operators said "don't you belong to the union?" he said "yes I do" didn't you know that clerical are on strike here? He said yes I do. He said you crossed picket lines there was no picket line in front of this plant. I go to lunch at o'clock if there is a picket line I won't cross it.Somehow that word got back to clerical, the steel plant has two entrances there was two secretaries there were placards. Now that guy never did leave he just took his truck and he drove it across

the street. He sat across the street and he ate his lunch. Well about two hours later a little work got back up and Bruce Rodeau came running and he says how come your not in the working. He says there's a picket line I don't cross picket lines. But you have to go in there we got to get this boiler back on line. He says I don't cross picket lines. I belong to the union our union honors picket lines. Bruce told his but this is an illegal strike. And the man says I don't know that. He said until my union representative comes here and tells me then I won't. Ten o'clock the next morning his union representative was there and told him It is an illegal strike you have to go into work. I use that as an example because a lot of people will say what do you mean so there are laws and rules of why a strike won't work. The only way a strike will work things you learn through the education of the union. Which ASME has got good schools. Is that they have to need you that employer has to need you and want you.

RM: Now you were saying that today it would be difficult to strike because you could all be replaced.

JH: I believe that a lot of people don't but as a group let's just take a scenario say. Say the ASME group went out on strike. One I don't believe management would give us there always threatening to give us they say were paying too much for custodians; your retirement, your benefits, your hospitalization. And when we go get maintenance masters to come in here and you know there people only make 7 or $8 /hr. What I feel about privatization is it makes one person rich and a lot more people poor. And you would get rid of a lot of decent paying jobs and replace them with very minimal wage jobs. I know that the university always has had a strike contingency program in the early days when we were here because I was always afraid that I would strike and I was considered erotical I wasn't my main concern was the employment wages the threat of the strike was always the main goals more positive then the strike itself so that worked in my benefit but I think I would have done everything up to two and three and work out an agreement before I would go on strike simply because of that and because I knew they had that contingency plan one was they had maintenance masters would be in that night and they could take care of custodial ? would be in that night but it would take them three days to be operational. Back then Northern would do the would go a chip? a worker ship...

RM: Then I guess all the workers the carpenters and the painters would work out there if there is nothing to work it would get done next week.

JH: And there would not be dependence they would not have to worry about the Picket line.

RM: But there fear would be of privatization, the would just bring in? and there would not be any job.

JH: I believe we would not get the letter the clerical got, I

believe we would tell the university problem and the would automatically go to privatization, we would be out there negotiating and hopefully trying to get back in. These are my feelings you know look around state you know since Engler got in has been a big thing so this is a big thing. On my part the biggest thing to ask me to face it today is the privatization issue and as a result we have lost numbers within the state and I am not really involved as I used to be but I do know we have lost groups for example our group while we get more and more buildings on campus, our group has shrunk, they want you know more and more work which is fine but you cannot do the impossible. I believe I will use auxiliary as an example they the way we work in the shops the way we get our money is will take care of maintenance if your light bulb is out of the socket the would send somebody over our shops they would put that light back up. and you would not pay for it would come out of shop budget. but if you did not like that light and you wanted a different one you would pay for it. the light the labor and everything else to put it in. we have a shop charge a rate which includes all of our benefits plus a seven hour day they expect us to take two 15 minutes breaks and 15 minutes to get on and off the job at the end of the day. Like wash up and everything. Like you said that you would get ? time well our job basically the lowest seniority guy in the shop his job count on us putting in a seven hour day. But people now my hourly rate is $15.32 my classification is a mason. For 11 years my job was a carpenter we were getting a lot of masonry work coming up the boss at the time asked me if I'd mind switching my classification. I had a little background I was a mason tender when I was thirteen years old as a summer job. and I did not mind that but you add to the benefits the shop charges the rate of $28.24. Now lot of people in auxiliary these are examples let's say dorm a hole in a wall the walls crack and need repair, auxiliary has to pay because we are basically paid by the state operations so they reimburse for everything, I'll go over there I can't get in the room it's dorm room, I can't get in nobody's home I got to go and get try to get a hold of a custodian let me go in and look waste an hour or two hours and it cost $28 and they get mad about it and so the bill is scrutinized and then a lot of times they will do things that try to save money, they want custodians to change outlets, they want custodians to that and whatever, their actually doing everything but custodial work I think the dorms show it. Their relying on students to pick that slack up. Now, I hate to use this as an example but I believe you probably read about the asbestos, well it just so happens that I"m also licensed to remove the asbestos. I do everything to keep my job, but it was a goof up but you know it wasn't malicious or anything but it was a goof, it's an example of them trying to save money and ordinarily I would do that, I would go in and ripe that out, just got through tiling there kitchen but this was not asbestos tile it was old and chances were, there was an eighty percent chance because after sixty five they said anything after 1975 in tile, nine inch tile you have an 80% chance that it contains this stuff before it, after 20% chance that it isn't but you can't count on that, because then as we found out the tile was laid over sheet goods and I put the sheet goods in 1980.

And the sheet goods had 25% asbestos fiber in there which is high. You know their saying its only 25 in the sheet goods and the tile was only like 9. Nine is high. That's what the product comprises of, 25 is really high. Mostly you find it in the pipes. I'm wandering here I have a habit of doing that. That in itself was probably 25 to 30% that you will find in the old. If you have an old house, your furnaces and the fittings. Well in any event trying to save money I think their winding up paying lots and lots of money.

RM: so this still an open issue this.

JH: This is an issue with the union right. Due the job you were hired for.

RM: Your saying being fined by the union for.

JH: No the university will get the

RM: Fined by the union?

JH: Fined by the state. On the asbestos deal. If there isn't I'll be real surprised because there's a few things happening there that. Well I guess we will have to wait until the investigation.

RM: What they should have done was to hire you a person who was licensed to remove it.

JH: Right they should have called and questioned it and they didn't and there is an asbestos coordinator and they called him and he was probably busy or something but it just didn't click in his mind. And then after the fact there was a few things that weren't done and that. And I think that was trying to keep it low key you know. I've had I'll go whenever I get called to do a job. I've been in basements, in tunnels I might only be removing a elbow and that elbow may be sopping wet because its leaking. I still put that suit and mask on. I know I'm not gonna get the airborne fibers out of this thing. One of the reasons I do it and it's uncomfortable especially in these tunnels is because I have to hang signs even though I am going down in that tunnel I have to hang a sign that I'm down there in that tunnel to warn people that there is asbestos. You never know. I've always said you never know who your gonna run into. And I've had students watch me put on a suit and everything oh I do that in the summer. So I'm real cautious one to protect my own self two to protect my fellow workers and the university community's health. I take my time I'll show you in the school when you go through contractors all tighten up a bag and they will staple them see. I tape mine. You can take a vacuum and blow that thing up like a balloon. So it just so happen I guess that one of the students they had working over there did asbestos removal in the summer time or has done it before. And he questioned was this tested? To the best of their knowledge it was because in '86 when an original survey was done they referred to floor tile as nonplyable. It still has when it's in there but when

you break it up it becomes flyable. And when you break it up and you take it out you have to dispose of it. Not throw it in the dumpers which then goes to the other place and contaminates with and those people complain and I heard they did and weren't told about it for a couple of days. So there's a big mess going on. Hopefully it would be great if we don't get fined I think that would take a small miracle. Because all that does is take money away from the school. I think that is an example of what I am trying to say. I've always used the example when they say you get somebody to do this and that and whatever and I say well guess why don't you let me teach collective bargaining. I will do it cheaper than Arnie Aho. That's an example but its the truth if your a custodian it does not mean you may be very versatile. You may be a licensed plumber but only job available in this community is of custodian it does not mean you can not do it. But you were hired to do certain things an I think we are getting away from that it is the issue the union is facing to try and see through the job classification and not penny pinch as the saying goes Jump over dollar to get the dime. Although privatization on a state level asked me on it in one of our priorities. And just locally people here privatization. Getting back the feeling of the word dignity and thing like that and I don't feel good when it comes to collective bargaining you don't have to tell me i'm not good anymore , I'm not needed anymore I come here , I work hard, I am as concerned about this place as any professor or anybody else. And I know that probably about 99% of the people in our group feel the same way too. And that leaves a bad taste in your mouth and that lingered for quite a while especially when they force something down your throat in to her words probably this is not good to say we have a new president I have enjoyed all the presidents here but she has lot of responsibility it is a rumor they want to give us 11/2 % and less benefits or difference in benefits leaves your feeling bad and the n of course who did not have any union probably did not get anything at all so this is how I feel of what our union does now. Its probably any member wants to get involved to interest them that I was interested art was new not have supervisor jamming the contract down your throat we drew a line management over here and there is labor over here. I was I think that in the mid-seventies personnel manager got to trust me a little bit and we found a medium to work with process to go through trying to get the wages go through we were getting our fair share and there was a period of time when management was concerned as we were and that was great that 's what was all about. Everybody did ? we are all in this boat together. We believed him because he only took one dollar the first year and it worked. that is a great ? I would like to see this place to back together before I leave. Different issues but they are threatening our group now.

RM: Now how many members do you have?

JH: I'm pretty sure it is 239 now I believe we are down to 140. Now the biggest loss is the food service. At the time when I came here Lee hall had a kitchen we had a job core here we had actually four kitchens operating. That was the biggest chunk of the loss. I

believe when I negotiated in 70's I am pretty sure we had 200 and some odd people. Again the food service? they used to ? potatoes one all you could eat. I a can remember 1970 to close to half we and bakers we had butchers and cooks. now w have the bake shope. three years ago counted 23 people total food service. they called Quad II kitchen. they done everything they can to trying keep everything under control to keep room and board cost down. And you know things have changed you know when I came here in '67 the parents came here the vietnam war we had a high three people to a dorm room. The most important thing those parents were concerned was education was first but what kind of food my kid is gonna get. That was real important to them. But today parents don't worry about it the grew up in fast food generation themselves and the year too are busy it makes it easier the food services where you see the biggest shrinkage. They also had separate dorms, men's dorm and women's dorm, we had a housekeeper and a custodian in each dorm this is Magers hall here you had a custodian and housekeeper here. the housekeeper's responsibility was basically to clean the bathroom. For men's room you had to put up a sign a day ahead that we will be cleaning the bathroom so they can help pick up their stuff, disinfect, sanitize. they don't do that anymore, they did away with the housekeepers. everywhere they would ? they still do but they use student employment to pick it up. Students came here to get an education, well they are allowed to work 20 hours on work study or whatever but their main concern is to keep this place clean. If they get paid to do their homework they are going to. I think lot of that happened. I think there are many reasons why we have shrunk and I don't run the place I would get rid of the administrators. everybody had their quick-fix. And that is the reason we shrunk. When did you come here?

RM: '69.

JH: Do you remember the barber shop the union barber shop that we had and from what I understand it was a prime job because everybody got their haircut once a week. Administrators did you know everybody long hair were not quite that much in not up here.

RM: Ya, that is interesting I have not thought about that in a long time.

JH: People I tell people a barber shop yeah we and a one chair barber shop. Sitting there in the university center I have not been there but i can walk through that door and show where it is. that is interesting.

RM: you fill in the blanks with this more union makes it fascinating, there is nothing written about it and there are lot of other things that are in newspapers and what not so people will have at least an idea that if they want more information they can go to the archives and check it further but at least they will have some sense you know when you go through the past and kind through the present and why we are here today. for instance putting some of this down from what your talking about the union how it has done,

why has it shrunk. Well there have been cuts made in these areas food and so on. So I want to, I don't want to go into, I'm not going to put your entire interview on but just to mention some of this things so people have a sense of what's happening out there.

JH: where we came from and where we are today. There was another thing and I think we should bring it up because it is one of the things I may regret I don't know. But when clerical and faculty finally did join the union there was a push onto put a union coalition together. And clerical was for it, faculty was for it, I wasn't. And I have heard that faculty and clerical have didn't like that. So that would it may be another