Interview with Frank Stapan

By Robert Kushen

July 22, 1970

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Oral History Project

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Respondent: Frank Stepan

Interviewer: Robert Kushen

Date: July 22, 1970

- I. You had been a member for how many years with the Chicago
 Truck Drivers Union?
- R. About 49 years.
- I. 49 years. Tell me about it.
- R. Well, when I started I was 9 years old. I was always monkeying around with horses, so a fellow used to have a garbage truck, and I used to ride with this fellow here and when I got to be around 14-16 years old, I joined the union.
- I. Now, that would have been what years?
- R. Oh, I was 14. I joined the union in 1910. I went out of school when my father died in 1904. I was born here in Chicago, 1894, on the 10th day of July. My mother and father were born in Europe, Clzechoslovakia. And all us children were born here in Chicago. My father was a tailor. He died when he was 36 years old in 1904. My mother slaved for us 27 years in the County Hospital scrubbing floors. And she died at 93. Anyway, we had six of us. So I started driving making a dollar a day on a single horse and wagon. I was hauling these 140 pound sacks of flour for a place at 16th and Jefferson. From there, I worked, here and I worked there. The union sent me

here and there. So, finally I got myself a steady job working for John P. Lynch. So we had some hard times, a lot of strikes. You had to go on strike, and you lost all that, and bringing up your family. I've been married 54 years. I married in 1916 on the 10th of June.

- I. 22 years old.
- I was 221/2 years old. So, I worked hard." You know, in them days you had to work hard to make a living. I went on a team of horses, so I was getting \$13.50 a week. In them days you lived better for the \$13.50 than you do today. You could always get a lot of pork chops for 50 cents. You got chicken for 35 cents, and that'd take care of all the family. So, then, I went along 'til I got to be 65 years old. So I retired. Now, that was in 1959. Well, I went with the horses all the way up to Gary and Waukegan. That was an all-day run; weather was below zero sometimes. The horses would fall down. You'd have to pick them up and roll yourself in their blankets to keep yourself warm. And then, from that, we got through with the horses, I went to truck driving. So when I went for my license, nobody learned me anything. I learned that all myself. I used to get in the truck. They had solid tire trucks with solid tire wheels, so I got in there, and I'd watch the fellow, what he was doing, backing up, etc. After five years with a chauffer's license, I was still driving horses. So when I went for a test, I passed the test. I

never drove a truck in my life. I was at the Transportation Building at Harrison and Dearborn. That's years ago. So they made me go from Harrison Street to Polk, Polk to Clark, Clark back to Harrison, Harrison back to Dearborn. So I passed that. I answered all the questions, When they asked me, I think it was only five questions; when they asked me what a carburator was, I told them it was a mechanical device. They asked me if I was going 60 miles an hour and a woman got in my way, what would I do. I says I wouldn't travel that fast. They asked me if I'd follow a fire engine. I told them no, and I passed all of them. They asked me how many cylinders were there, how many pistons in a cylinder. I told them four. And I passed it. I think I done very good. I learned that all myself. And I always liked to work outside. That's why you see me today, the way I'm husky and that. And 1 went through two bad operations. I had my gall bladder taken out with a hundred stones. And I drove a truck, and worked heavy, never got a hernia 'til I got this gall bladder. I must've made a mis-step or something, and I got myself a hernia. So that was two operations in one year; And my wife was in the hospital 8 times and she was in a coma 2 days. They were supposed to operate on her. She pulled all the hoses out of her nose. And I come down there the next day. I didn't believe the doctor. He said she might die overnight. That's over a year ago. Here she is.

- I. When you first joined the union, was that the Chicago Truck Drivers
 Union?
- R. Chicago Truck Drivers, yeah. I'll tell you how this happened. When I joined the union, there was only one union, that was the International 705. Then Mike Galvin organized the Chicago Truck Drivers Union. He threw the barn in Chicago independent. And I been with them ever since.
- I. Now, you talked about the early days and a lot of strikes.
- R. I was in two strikes since I was driving.
- I. When were they and what were they about?
- R. About wages, overtime. And then we stopped working on Sunday. We used to take turns and go and feed the horses and bed them down on Sundays. Well, we cut that out. Then, we had to pay for this pension fund ourself. They used to take a nickel an hour out on us, 'til they made all these firms pay for it. I think we done all right in our strikes.
- I. When the union was organizing were there any other organizations that were active along with it, fraternal groups or churches?
- R. No, No. Not that I know, no. Well? there was three different unions driving, well, excavating too, that's all different. There's 704, and you take 725, that was baggage and parcel. 711 was movers.

That was Chicago and you had two different locals in that, too.

I have an experience to tell you about. It was when I got tipped I don't know how long ago this is. I was coming along. down Lincoln Avenue. I was driving for Ajax Waste Paper. And there's a street before you hit Western Avenue and Lincoln there. stopped for a light. So when the light changed, I started going. A green hornet guy came along. He hit me in the back, twisted me around, and then he tipped me over. I had to crawl out through the windows to get out of the truck. And then he tried to say that I was going 50 miles an hour. And that, in the first speed. Where's a fellow going to go 50 miles an hour? Then we went to court. The lady was suing. She had a miscarriage on the streetcar. She was suing our company and the streetcar. She won the case and so did I. When we got before the judge, the lady's lawyer says, "Well the man was going 50 miles an hour." You know what my lawyer said? He says if this man was going 50 miles an hour you would never have tipped him over. You would've knocked him in Lake Michigan. They caught him lying! How's a man going to go 50 miles an hour in first speed on Lincoln Avenue, Lawrence and Western, there. You know where that intersection is there?

- I. Yes.
- R. There's a stop light, Well, I waited for that. So I thought a bomb hit me. And here; I had a helper with me. I laid on top of him when we tipped over. I don't know how he got from under me to

crawl out through the window. They had to get me a step-ladder to get me out. I went through a lot of experiences.

- I. Going back to when you first joined the union, what happened as far as the companies that you were working for? How did they react to the union coming in?
- R. They weren't going to bawl you out, as long as you done your work.

 I never had any trouble with any firm. I done my work and that was it.
- I. Do you know when the union was first organizing, were the organizers harassed at all by the companies?
- R. Oh, no. No, they just talked to them. Mickey Galvin was a swell guy. That was the head of the Independent 705. Any time you had any trouble, you just went down to the union. They just went down there and just told the boss what's what and that was it. If you lost a package on the truck or anything, it wasn't your fault. The firm would have to stand good. They couldn't hold you for it. That's how nice they were. I never had no trouble with the union. I loved Independent 705. That was my bread and butter. And it just happened, when I got 65 years old; I says I had it. I'm through. I had an ulcer. I went from about 180 pounds down to 142 pounds. I think I done pretty good in many years.
- I. I'd say so. How was it driving a truck during the Depression? Were you able to find work during the Depression?

- R. Well, we had to take it, work so many days. But I got along. If I had to marry again, I'd marry my wife again. She saved, never had a woman that saved like she did. We had four children. I worked one week and then we had to take one week off, to let the other fellow work.
- I. It was during the Depression.
- R. We didn't have to do that, but we just showed 'em that that man has got to live just like we did.
- I. You were able to get by then?
- R. I was able, yes. And we were making small wages, but I still got by. I never went to work any place: I waited 'til my week was up and then I'd go back to work. I had seniority there. I could've kicked if I'd wanted. As long as the other fellow that was behind me wanted to let this fellow work, well, we let him work. But years ago, things were cheap. And you worked three days a week, it wouldn't hurt you because you could go out and get a big piece of beef for a quarter. You could get a chicken for 35 cents, duck for 50 cents. You got along.
- I. One problem that I've heard from some men who drove trucks back in the early days in chicago, was that overtime was a big problem.
- R. Yeah, that was it. Yeah.

- I. That you'd go in and sometimes you'd have to work a 10 or 11 or 12 hour day, and there was no extra pay for overtime or anything.
- R. That's right, When I worked was from 6 to 6. Used to have an airline wagon. They'd give you a bunch. The depots closed at six. You'd start at 5. You'd get five out and one in. You had to make them. The boss would say, "If,the horse drops, the harness will fit another one." I done that for a long time.
- I. Did getting the overtime and better hours all come about once you got a union?
- R. It got to be nice after a while. Look at the overtime they got to pay 'now. Well, you see, when I drove, I drove an airline wagon for a while and I got myself in steady. I worked for Otto L. Could and Company about 25 years. From there I went back to the union. They went under. They had a fellow come in there to buy a lawnmower. Some hardware store give him a letter to go into the Goulds. So the man forgot to hand him the lawnmower. And so he went back on the fire escape, fell down, and broke his neck. He sued the company for so much, they had to close up. They went under.
- I. What was an airline wagon?
- R. Well, you had to chase, you know, make the horse go, so you make a deep, deep one. They all call that airline, the airline wagon.

- I. So yours was a kind of hustling job, running from depot to depot?
- K. Yes. Then, make five out and one in. That's pickup, you know, and you had to get there before 6 o'clock.
- I. What was it like, driving a team in Chicago, back then?
- R. There was nothing to it. You had nothing in your way, only the streetcar. You got in the car track, he'd be behind you ringing. You had to get out of the car track. Some places you couldn't get out of the car track. Some of them tracks were high, you had to wait 'til you got to a place where you could pull out.
- I. Do you remember when the traffic really started getting heavy in Chicago?
- R. When they started getting all the trucks, trailers. That's when it was rough. But them days you never seen so many accidents like you do today.
- I. When you were driving a truck, did you handle a straight job or did you handle the semi?
- R. No, I never handled the semi. I drove a straight job. That's why I left the place. When they wanted me to go on a semi, I left there. I got too old. I was close to my pension. So I says why should I do it if I don't want?

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- I. Do you remember when they first started using semi's?
- R. Oh, that's so many years ago that I can't remember.
- I. They've been around for a long time?
- R. Oh, for a long time is right, yeah. They're pushing all the straight jobs off the street today. They got this piggy-back.: now.
- I. Did you like driving a truck?
- R. I did. I loved it. I tell you what happened though. You're going to laugh at this. When I started driving a truck, I used to holler "whoa" just like I did with the horses. Yeah! One day at the union, the guys yell at me, "You ain't got the horses, you got a truck there."
- I I guess as long as you hit the brakes though, you're o.k.
- R. Yeah. I tell you what, when I drove a truck, I was coming out of the post office and I had a Big Mack with chain drive. And the chain broke, and you ain't got no brakes. So I rubbed the walls to get all the way down from upstairs. And I took the whole side, the name, right off of the side of the truck. I couldn't help it. If I'd kept rolling down that hill, I'd of killed somebody at the bottom, and myself too. That was the worst part of the chain drive. When the chain broke, you had no brakes.

- I. You couldn't stop, when the chain broke?
- R. No.
- I. When did they finally stop making all the chain drive trucks?
- R. Oh, right around the thirties, yeah. Then they started putting some of them solid tires. When I first got the truck over at Goulds it was a solid tire truck, too. In about a month, they said you couldn't go to Waukegan with it. They couldn't go on the highway anymore. So they had to make it in the news, rubber tires.
- I. They passed laws about the solid tire trucks?
- R. Yeah. I used to make all them suburbans, Gary, Hammond, Downers Grove, and all them, Waukegan, Park Ridge, and all them. That was my run. I seen the world. When somebody was looking for me and they couldn't find me, when they'd come up the steps, and when they'd smell the barns, they knew there was a teamster living there, because you always had that in your skin. Put your Sunday clothes, on, you still smell like a barn.
- I. Any special things happen with the union that you can think of? Any big breakthroughs that they made in dealing with the companies?
- R. Oh, they made a lot of good deals with the companies. Like they're doing right now, they're making good deals with the companies.

- I. Do you remember anything that stands out in your mind, anything that was special, that was really important that they did while you were an active member.
- R. Well, giving us this welfare, these pensions. I think that's important.
- I. Now, when they say you're independent, that means you're completely independent. You're not associated with any other?
- R. No, that's independent. We got one of the best business agents that ever walked on the streets, especially, what's his name, the big guy, Penner. Eddy Fenner, yeah.
- I. I've heard a lot of good about Eddy Fenner.
- R. Kagan, too, So if they're here to stick, they're going to love me.
- I. I think everybody that I've talked to thinks highly of Fenner.
- R. Well, he started, his father used to have a rubber shop on Lake and Wells and Eddy started working for Galvin as office boy. When Galvin left, we left Eddy and he's there today.
- I. So he's there for a long time now?
- R. Oh, yeah. A long time is right. But he wasn't there as long as I was though. I loved it, if I had to do it again, I'd

do it over.

- Something, I guess, about being able to be outside instead of doing factory work inside.
- R. Yes. Winter or summer, not once did it ever bother me, I walked along down the street with my neck open in winter last time, like this here. When I started driving, I was still single, you could never see me with a heavy coat on. I was always with a jacket or something and they used to have me out, "You're going to get sick." As long as I had my feet covered up with the blankets and a good pair of gloves, that's all you needed.
- I. Going back for a minute to the depression, do you remember what you were making; what the pay was then, back during the depression?
- R. Well, during the depression, it was about 25 dollars a week and when they took this off you went home with about twenty. I went through a lot of depression.
- You were talking before, and you said that the union had been out on strike.

- R. Twice, three times now. I was in two of them.
- I. When were those strikes?
- R. Oh, years back, the first one, way back. They had the horses then. Then the second one I was working for Ajax, but that ain't so long ago when we had that second strike. Well, I wouldn't want to put something that wouldn't be right. It's so long ago that I don't remember. I'm getting a little older now, I don't remember that.
- I. It has nothing to do with age. I can't remember things I did last week.
- R. That's the truth. It gets off your mind. I forgetlots of times when I'm reading a commercial. I make blunders on them, too.

 We've got a little polka show, WTAQ. The 9th of August we're going to be at the Lion's camp up there in Lake Villa, doing a program, and I got to engineer that.
- I. Are you active in the Lion's organization?
- R. No, but they made me cause on Candy Day I'd go out and we'd generally have a show up here at 26th and Pulaski, Second Federal Bank, we have a radio show there. I just had a dinner with the Lion's Club yesterday, that is, as I told you.

- I. I had that down here, that's why I was asking you. I've seen signs for Little Village, I think along Cermak Road.
- R. They've got Little Village all over from here. The Little Village around here is opposite 26th and Central Park. And I do so much for the boys, the Vet parades who get trophies. Me and my wife were wonderful dancers. We used to go out dancing and get trophies for dancing.
- I. As long as we've had our dancing days once in our lives we can't really complain about it.
- R. Oh, we did a lot of dancing. This one we won in 1964.
- I. Is there anything you're not interested in? I saw the pigeons.
- R. I raised the homers. I've been handling them since I was a kid 9 years old. 1 could take them any place, 1000 miles, 500 miles and they'd come home.
- I. They have competitions with them?
- R. Oh, yeah. You've got to fly against different lofts, you know.

 Every time the pigeons shift, there's "over 1000 maybe 2000. They
 got to complete with them, come home. First you've got to measure
 them and then the airlines. Everybody's got his own airlines.

If I get a bird now and a fellow the next block, he's got me beat unless I got three minutes on him. But if he gets a bird right after me, further this way, they got you.

- I. Going back again to the union days, were there any political people in Chicago that the union had anything to do with, the mayors, the aldermen that worked with you on anything?
- R. Never, never. They were out, they never interfered with our unions.
- 1. So your union in other words just did it pretty much by itself?
- R. That's why they called it independent, Chicago and vicinity.
- I. All in all, you're pretty happy with what the union did?
- R. And I'd be happy again.
- R. Remember, we had to go in the parades?
- 'I. You had parades?
- R. We used to go with the horses. I worked for Al Gould and Company.

 Each wagon had ironing boards on it. I had clothes baskets. And

 in them days the John P. Lynch and Marshall Fields had good horses,

 big heavy ones. But we used to parade with the horses, all the

wagons going down State Street. That's a good thing we got it in there. I forgot all about that.

- I. It's a good thing to have in.
- R. This was about 1917. John P. Lynch, see it? Al Gould and Company here. (Looking at photographs) It was winter time, see the snow. I got the blanket, the kidney blankets on the horses.
- I. And you're what? Unloading off one of the railroad cars?
- R. Yeah. This the guys loading the car--Big Joe-ironing boards.

 These ironing boards, you know. There are the two helpers.

 This is a photograph of Fisher, that was down there.
- I. There's one other question that I wanted to ask you about, something that you just brought up. You said that this one steward got you into the union. Did it help to know somebody who was a union member in order to join the union?
- R. Well, they see that I was a good worker, that I needed it, so he talked it up for me. That was the other union, the International, before the Chicago organized it. Chicago organized then in 1908.

 And I didn't join there until a little later, about 1910 or so.

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I was working for Wing Teaming there at 16th and Jefferson driving a single horse and wagon.

- I. Wing Teaming?
- R. Wing Teaming. Hauling flour.
- I. Today if somebody wants to join the Independent Truck Drivers Union does it help today to know somebody who is a union member?
 You can join if they take you in. You know, you don't have to know somebody.
- I. This sounds like a democratic union.
- R. The only time that I know is only a kid and that's how they got me in and that's because I could pass for 18 years old.

 I was a big kidalready. I was about 14 then. But my mother needed my help so I thought to myself, they got me a job in a tailor shop and I didn't like it. I wasn't driving then.

 I said, I know how to harness a horse. I was monkeying around with this. I had that garbage truck, you know. I used to harness horses, clean them, and that's how I learned. I forgot to tell you, before you got a job where they put you to work, you know, you had to sign, had to sit down and tell

them where all the depots are. You had to be experienced at that. That's one thing I forgot, too. Put that in, that you had to know all the depots or baggage rooms.

- I. One other thing, too, when did you change from driving a team of horses to driving a truck? When did they first put you on a truck?
- R. Oh, I forgot about that, too. That was about '18, I guess 1918 -no, later than that, way later than that. When we got married I
 was still driving the horses. Maybe around 1925, some time around
 there.
- I. The horses then already by the 1920's were sort of on their way out and the gasoline and diesel trucks were on their way in by then. Anything you want to bring up, anything we haven't touched on? Anything at all, regarding growing up in Chicago, your life in the union, or anything else?
- R. Nell, growing up. I did pretty good as I told you, the union is all right, always helped me. So I got no kicks, so that covers up my story. So people know what a man went through, and what he had to do.

- I. Well, that's what we're trying to find out. We're talking to union people all over the Chicago area.
- R. And I thank you very much for interviewing me and any time you want it again, I'm always happy to be your guest.
- I. Great. Thank you.