Min Matheson and the ILGWU in the Northern Anthracite Region, 1944-1963

By Robert P. Wolensky

*University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point* and
Kenneth C. Wolensky

*Pennsylvania State University*

When David Dubinsky assumed the presidency of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in 1932, so-called runaway shops had become a problem of major and growing proportion. The runaways were the result of changes in the organization of clothing manufacturing that had developed in the 1920s. During that decade, jobbers—or wholesalers—who secured garment orders directly from retailers and, in turn, supplied raw materials to independently-owned submanufacturing shops to fill those orders, virtually replaced the manufacturer-contractor system that had developed earlier in the twentieth century. Under that system, which itself had replaced sweatshops and homework, large, relatively stable garment houses did most of the cutting and sewing in their own inside shops, only occasionally contracting sewing to smaller outside shops. By 1926, about three-quarters of garment production had been captured by the new jobber-submanufacturer system. A new decentralization emerged along with it, bringing “the industry back to the ‘chaotic’ condition from which it began to emerge during the first decade of the century,” just the conditions that had led to the founding of the ILGWU in New York City on June 3, 1900.

As jobbers sought to drive down prices by playing one submanufacturer against another, shops sprouted in remote geographic areas away from union contracts and higher wages. Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal region began attracting runaway shops from New York during the 1930s. The area offered two alluring features: a large potential workforce of women and proximity to New York, which allowed the regular exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods. It was a region whose economic decline had begun in the 1920s, following decades of labor-management conflict and growing competition from alternative energy sources. After some respite during World War II, the decline continued during the 1950s, when the coal industry completely collapsed following the infamous Knox Mine Disaster in 1959. With few employment alternatives, thousands of struggling...
mining families survived by fathers’ commuting to work in neighboring states or distant cities and mothers’ and daughters’ working in the burgeoning garment industry. Despite the low pay and often brutal working conditions, garment employment nevertheless often made the difference in a family’s ability to survive. Some of the sewing was done at home, but most of it took place in subcontractors’ shops. To make the situation even more difficult, some of the shops were owned by organized crime families or individuals connected to them. The underworld invested racket-earned money in the garment industry because the required capital outlay was small and the profits high. Many shops not owned by gangsters felt intimidated by them, especially in Pittston, a coal town about five miles east of Wilkes-Barre that was fast emerging as a regional garment center and that had long been the seat of organized crime in the area.

The ILGWU created the Eastern Organization Department in August 1922, to organize the runaways in the small towns of Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, New Jersey, and the New England States. In 1944, the task of organizing runaway shops in Pittston and other communities in the northern coal fields fell to Minnie (Min) and Wilfred (Bill) Matheson. When they began organizing in the Wyoming Valley of northeastern Pennsylvania, the Mathesons could count about 650 union members in six shops. When they departed in 1964, the Wyoming Valley District consisted of 168 shops in three locals—Wilkes-Barre (No. 249), Pittston (No. 295), and Nanticoke (No. 327)—with a total of 11,000 members. The largely untold story of this remarkable turnaround is the story of garment workers fighting for employment rights and decent living standards, of resistance and subterfuge by a criminal element, of innovative organizing strategies, of internal union conflict, and of nearly two decades of strong leadership by Min and Bill Matheson.

Min Matheson and the Wyoming Valley Oral History Project

As part of a larger oral history research project on the Wyoming Valley, Robert Wolensky interviewed Min Matheson about her and her husband’s work for the ILGWU for a total of thirteen and a half hours on three separate occasions: November 20-21, 1982; December 5, 1988; and June 28, 1990. Serious illness and his eventual death prevented Bill Matheson from participating in the interviews. For a number of reasons, oral history has been a most appropriate tool for this investigation. It is an effective method of capturing the rich details of union rallies, strikes, personalities, and internal problems unavailable in any other source. It furnished a window on Mrs. Matheson’s private, off-the-record dealings with shop
owners, gangsters, union officials, and ILGWU members. It is the only source of information about her unscripted and unrecorded radio addresses during the 1950s. It captured her philosophy and strategy of labor organizing in her own words and gave full play to her well-known determination and vivaciousness. And, finally, it allowed for rich insights into Min Matheson’s background, which provided the social, political, and ideological ground of her life’s work. The task here is twofold: to tell part of the story of an unsung hero of Pennsylvania labor history, including her personal background, life in the labor movement, and approach to labor organizing; and to discuss some aspects of the deeper, symbolic meaning of her oral memoir.

A Youth Among Labor Activitists in Chicago

Minnie Hindy Lurye was born in Chicago in 1909, the second of eight children and the first daughter of immigrant Jews from Russia. Early exposure to the labor movement came from her father, Max, a cigar maker and militant labor activist who helped found the Chicago Cigar Makers Union. Thanks largely to her father, Minnie Lurye became immersed in a world of Jewish socialist culture, labor struggles, and uncompromising dedication to labor’s cause. As she tells it:

I was maybe fifteen, sixteen years old. You see, my father was always active in trade unions, and there were always things happening in our house. Immigrants were coming and there were always meetings. We were sort of a hot spot for any ideology or any viewpoint. I think the first time we had a meeting was to commemorate the eight hour day and the martyrdom of the Hay Market martyrs when Albert Parsons was executed. The immigrants would come and sing their songs and some would be revolutionary songs. . . . I’d listen avidly, you know, and eat up all this knowledge. Pop would take me to the big Socialist picnics at Riverview Park. I’d sit up on his shoulders and listen to all these fiery speakers. And so you assimilate a lot of that stuff. And it always stayed with me. It stayed with the whole family, except me more so. . . .

Every Sunday I’d go to the Chicago Federation of Labor meeting. If there was any kind of radical meeting or a trade union meeting, you could always be sure I’d be there. And this was my life. You know, listening and taking part in anything I could do. Someone wanted a leaflet passed out or someone to talk somewhere or to do one thing or another.

When in 1919 United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer established a General Intelligence Division within the Department of Justice to collect information on citizens engaged in anti-American activities and appointed a young J. Edgar Hoover to lead it, raids on the homes of suspected radicals ensued.
Palmer raid was one of Matheson's earliest recollections:

We lived on Taylor and Seeley Avenue in Chicago, Illinois. . . . One very early morning, I can remember sleeping in a [bed] with my sister, and my older sister, Rose, we were only twelve or thirteen months apart, we were like twins, [and] the police came up the stairs. We lived three stories up, and we had seven boarders living with us; some were relatives. And they arrested every male in the family and tore the house apart. Now my father was the leader of the Cigar Makers Union and they were planning a strike, and I guess it was pretty well known. And the cigar industry was a big industry in Chicago at that time, and we did have leaflets and literature. But Mom, who was smart and protective of my father, she had all this material on a top shelf in the pantry with her jelly jars in front of it. And when the Red Squad hit the house, you know, and started tearing it up and looking for proof of the fact that—they were just trying to prove we were Reds. . . . My mother begged them not to bother her pantry because everything else had been ransacked, but leave her pantry alone, and they did, surprisingly.11

Along with run-ins with the federal government, Matheson recalls that Max Lurye clashed with Chicago's Capone mob in 1927:

They [the mob] were taking over unions. My father had been blacklisted because he was a cigar maker and there were so many strikes. Anyhow, he was blacklisted and he couldn't get a job so he went peddling junk. And he had this little trunk and then there was this junk yard where all these little, mostly Jewish peddlers would bring their bits of junk and get whatever monies they made that day. Why the hell Capone wanted it, god knows. I don't know. So he sent Lefty Lewis around to take over one of their meetings, and my father didn't speak English but he was a very good speaker in Jewish [Yiddish]. These guys came to the meeting, and they take over the platform, and with the butt of a gun they knock for order. My father was sitting in the front row with my younger brother, Sy. And this gangster makes a speech and tells them he's going to be there, and they're going to do this and so on. In and around the fringes of the crowd are other gunmen. So my father said to him in Jewish, "Are you finished?" And he just looked at him. My father marched up to the platform. The guy didn't know a wild man like him. And my father kicked the gun right off the stand. And he started to talk in Jewish, and they tried to stop him, but the people were yelling, "You talk Max, talk Max." So he talked. He really got the people going, and they [organized criminals] retreated. They decided, "What you going to do with these crazy people?" you know. They'll find some other way. And they retreated.

But when my father came to the junkyard the next day, he was standing talking to a man by the name of Braverman who hadn't been active. He was a
father of seven children. They went to shoot Dad and they killed Braverman. That was one of the first incidents. Of course, all the other peddlers were scared except my father, who was yelling for vengeance, that he would get them, he would get them. And then a couple of days later he was driving his truck, and he stopped his truck for a light on Sacramento and Roosevelt Road in Chicago. As he stopped for the light, so did a streetcar. They came along and they peppered my father's truck with machine gun bullets. Some of them hit him, and some hit the streetcar. . . . My father had three bullets in the groin area. By the time I got word and I got to the hospital, my father was still conscious. And he said, "I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die."

Max Lurye survived the attack, but his daughter would never forget the gangsters that had almost killed him. Indeed, years later she would recall them often
when she was battling crime bosses as she was organizing for the ILGWU in Pittston. The attempted murder of her father also reinforced his strong influence on her. Of all the Lurye children, Min and her brother Will remained closest to his views, which were so rigid that he once made her feel guilty about accepting a salary to organize. “He thought this was the type of thing I should do for nothing!” she recalled. Her father’s values coupled with a childhood and adolescence steeped in the activism of her neighborhood and city led her to radical opinions:

I was an extremist. I came out of Chicago. The Hay Market case was very fresh in everybody’s minds. We hated the courts. We hated the judges. We hated the police, especially we hated them. We had certain procedures for keeping ourselves pure trade unionists. We would not sit down and break bread with an employer. We would not participate with elected officials who were not prounion.

In 1928, at the age of nineteen, Min Lurye fell in love with Bill Matheson, a labor activist twelve years her senior whom she had met at the Sunday meetings of the Chicago Federation of Labor. As a sign of their radicalism, they established a household without being legally married, and Min retained her original name. With Bill’s encouragement she left Chicago in 1932 to help striking textile workers in Paterson, New Jersey. But after six months of exhausting toil, the strike was crushed. Uncertain of her next move, acquaintances urged her to relocate in New York City and begin working as a dressmaker. She took their suggestion and proceeded to learn the trade from scratch. She quickly gained the respect of her coworkers and in 1937 was elected chairlady of ILGWU Local 22, with 32,000 members one of the largest in the country. Bill Matheson joined her in New York shortly after the Paterson strike, and together they embarked on careers with the ILGWU.  

In 1941, Bill Matheson accepted a position as a union organizer in the north-central Pennsylvania community of Sayre. Min Lurye continued working in New York until their decision to have children brought some major changes. They were legally married, and their first daughter, Mariann, was born in 1941. Min Matheson then joined her husband in Sayre. Much to the amazement of colleagues, she stayed out of union affairs and devoted her attention to Mariann. A second child, Betty, was born shortly thereafter. The Matheson family’s stay in Sayre ended in 1944 when the New York office asked Bill to organize shops that had been sprouting in the coal towns of the Wyoming Valley. The family moved to Kingston, and soon thereafter the union asked Min Matheson to help “clean up this mess down here.” Within a few years she became the General Manager of the Wyoming Valley District, and Bill became Director of Education for eastern Pennsylvania.
Organizing Against Organized Crime in Pittston

The Mathesons' effort to build the union met with some immediate successes in the Wilkes-Barre, Kingston, and Nanticoke areas. But in Pittston, the situation was much more difficult, Matheson recalls:

At that time, well, there had been things happening [with organized crime] . . . the big shots in New York, the Genoveses and Albert Anastasia, were having their legal problems. So they wanted a legal front for their illicit activities, which included everything. They had really set up a center in Pittston that had the most beautiful girls, you know, little dark-haired Italian girls. Little beauties. Prostitution was rampant. . . . So now they needed a legal front, and the dress industry was easy. You need very little capital, and all you have to do is have a handful of machines and you're in business. And all these manufacturers in New York who were looking for cheap labor outlets loved it. So work was coming in plentifully. New York might have been unemployed, but not Pennsylvania. . . . All the mines were down, men weren't working. We [had] organized in New York and surrounding areas. The wages were getting higher, you know. Piece rates were better and employers were looking for low wages and areas where they could produce the garments at the lowest level possible, so they were running . . .

They told the women, for example, "We'll teach you to sew." They worked for weeks for nothing. And the hours! You know there were laws in the land, but they weren't carrying out any of the laws. They did what they wished and made it easy for the women to come in any time of the day or night. Double, triple shifts. I'd talk to the women at meetings. And the first thing is, "Are you registered to vote?" Yes, they're registered to vote, but they don't vote. "Why don't you vote? [Do] you go down and vote?" "Well, we do, we go down and we register, but we can't cast our vote. Our man has to cast our vote for us." I said, "Why?" "Well, that's the system." That's the system which the Mafia had ordained to control the elections. The women would go in and sign as citizens, but then then the man [husband or other male, possibly a shop owner] would go to the polling place and cast their vote. The women were never allowed to vote. . . . Attorneys and judges, a lot of them knew, but they . . . it was all covered up, you know. They could have stopped it.

Moreover, the Pittston criminal element could count on the support of local police to keep the union out:

At the Pittston end [of the Wyoming Valley], it was as if every empty store, every empty space, was occupied by dress shops. They were runaways from New York where there were jobbers providing work here to get away from the New York [union] agreement. . . . So we started organizing. We'd go into Pittston and the police would put us back on the train and tell us, "You're not wanted here."
So we started coming in my car because they used to watch that little railway station to see if we were coming.

One particularly disturbing incident during the Pittston campaign might have ended in violence had it not been for some innovative tactics:

Another girl that we got from one of the shops, Helen Bamosky—I think they're Lithuanian . . . anyhow, she was driving the car, and we were going down to a very early morning picket line and there, on the corner, were all these tough guys. And she said, “I don’t think we’d better stop because we’re outnumbered.” What were we, five women in the car? And I said, “Helen, no matter what happens today, we have to stop. Because if we don’t turn up today, this may hurt our chances to really get this town organized. We have to just put up a very brave front.” And I said, “But we have to think of something spectacular to worry them like they think they’re worrying us.” We were scared. I don’t want to make you think that we were so brave; we were scared.

But we couldn’t figure and we didn’t have much time to talk because they saw our car coming down, and then she turned around. We were coming up on their side of the street in order to stop in front of the factory. And it’s as if we all had one mind, that if they were going to get tough and come across and beat us up or do something rotten, really rotten, then we wanted people to know about it. So the minute we stopped, as we got out of the car we all were screaming. And we hadn't made it up at all. Later on we laughed like kids, you know. I got out of the car and I said, “You rotten hoodlums! What are you doing in this town? You don’t live here. We live here. This is our town not yours, and you do one little thing to hurt these women. . . .” Because I was their leader. But in the meantime all the other girls were screaming at them. Screaming! Pretty soon windows were opening, and people were putting their heads out. I said, “There are witnesses to anything you think you are going to do.” And, honestly, these men almost went crazy. It was like, “My god, how can you do anything with a bunch of crazy women like that?” They were walking around, waving their hands, putting their hands over their ears. And not a squeak out of them. Nothing. You see? . . . So I always said that the women defeated them.

Mrs. Matheson expressed dismay at the relatively powerless role of women in the community and, indeed, in the ILGWU. She was appalled by the lack of women at the highest level of the union and recalled with some pain the poor treatment she had experienced at the hands of high-level union officials. Organizing women in the face of powerlessness and intimidation, she relied on three sets of resources: personal, organizational, and community-based.

Min Matheson exhibited enormous personal skill as an organizer, including brilliant, spur-of-the-moment strategies that drew upon the strengths and social
roles of women and often gained wide media attention. As she put it, "I had to evolve, think up ideas how to protect ourselves." The incident recounted above is illustrative. Another time, gangsters verbally attacked her during a strike as a slut who wasn't fit to lead local girls. She furiously phoned the union hall and asked a friend to collect her daughters, aged four and five, dress them in brightly starched pinafores, and bring them to the picket line. Once there, she handed them picket signs, and they joined the line. How could the tough guys call her a slut now? The press prominently featured the "children on picket line" story.

On another strike occasion, it was clear that the gangsters were becoming increasingly frustrated by their inability to deal with resolute women. As hostile words were exchanged between theoughs and the pickets who had lined up across the street, one tough, in a fit or anger, shouted that Mrs. Matheson should bring her weakling husband to the picket line and see how long he'd last. Infuriated by the remark, she steamed across the street toward the hooligans, singled out Russell Bufalino—the reputed top crime boss in the region—stuck her finger in his face, and shot back: "I don't need to bring Bill up here, Russ, because I'm twice the man you'll ever be!" The hoods were again baffled (and, according to Mrs. Matheson, actually amused) by the gibe. They also had further evidence of her tenacity and audaciousness, and the display of courage was not lost on the pickets across the street.

Min Matheson's personal charisma undoubtedly contributed to her organizing ability. According to Dorothy Ney, another field representative, women were willing to follow her because she gave them courage and strength: "They used to just pack the [union] hall because they just loved to hear Min talk. She could convince anybody [to join the union]. Whatever she believed in, they believed in." She also remained in close touch with the union rank-and-file, thereby garnering immense respect. For example, Ney said:

Min was right on the picket line with us. She went at six o'clock in the morning like we did, and she was on the picket line most every morning. . . . And even that gang [organized crime in Pittston], they had a lot of respect for Min, you know. They knew she was doing her job. They didn't want her there, but they had a lot of respect for her.13

Mrs. Matheson's leadership style blended very well with another innovative organizing tool that became crucial in garnering community support: radio. She became a regular on the airways as the union bought air time to educate members and foster its relationship with the larger community:

Little Bill Phillips ran WQXR. . . . We used him all through the 1958 strike. Every
single day we were on the air. And people listened, not just people in Pittston but the Valley listened. So they'd get a bang out of "what are they up to now," you know. It was like an ongoing soap opera. We told them what we were going to do, so they were waiting for us. But we didn't give a damn.

Successful use of the radio and other media brought considerable attention to Mrs. Matheson and the ILGWU and thereby provided some protection against physical harm. Although she and some of her fellow unionists were physically abused on occasion, she came to know extreme violence firsthand when her brother Will Lurye, a father of four, was murdered while organizing for the ILGWU in New York. The culprit was a bodyguard of crime boss Albert Anastasia, whose shop Will had been picketing.

Some 100,000 people marched in Will's funeral procession in one of the largest outpourings of support for organized labor in New York's history. Her father, Max, devastated by the murder, died a few days later. Father and son were buried side by side, their tombstone inscription reading, "With devotion and courage, they lived and died for the cause of labor."

Mrs. Matheson also relied on the union itself as an organizing resource, particularly its increasingly large membership base, strong leadership tradition, and growing legitimacy within the community. Because she was able to motivate women, the union ranks swelled, and once organized, the members were able to mobilize additional support. One strike meeting in Pittston, for example, drew five hundred members from throughout the region. The District's Silver Jubilee Dinner in 1962 drew over one thousand members. Moreover, eleven thousand local members could potentially influence family, friends, and neighbors to vote in elections, attend meetings, write letters, and otherwise support union goals.

Yet another organizational resource was the tradition of active and successful leadership enjoyed by the needle trades, including the ILGWU. Mrs. Matheson firmly believed that strong leadership was absolutely essential to union building, and she clearly envisioned herself as the duly constituted leader, the District Manager, of the ILGWU in the Wyoming Valley, a position she accepted as a "calling," although she did not use this term.

The third organizational resource Mrs. Matheson relied upon, legitimacy, resulted from, and in turn enhanced, the status the union had achieved in the community by 1950. Because a solid, grassroots base of prounionism stemming from loyalty toward the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and other unions had long characterized the Wyoming Valley, gaining legitimacy among ordinary citizens was not difficult. However, Mrs. Matheson was also successful in
garnering the support of some of the most prominent Wyoming Valley citizens. Although she never adopted the virulent anticapitalism of the ILGWU's far left because she saw the American economy as capable of progressive reform, the idea of cultivating the support of business and political leaders did not come easily to a person of Mrs. Matheson's background. She remained suspicious of elites but nevertheless pursued a course of cooperating with them soon after arriving in the area:

So here I had to begin to learn that in order to organize I've got to have the community in my corner. . . . And gradually, we were very carefully asked to participate in one community venture or another. I remember the first time I had to sit down [at a meeting] in the Sterling Hotel. One of our employers who headed the Employers' Association asked me if I would come to this luncheon, and I was very hesitant because I had been brought up strictly where labor doesn't mix with capital, and you don't betray your workers and sit with them and eat with them, you know. I had all these very definite concepts.

So I went with great trepidation to the Sterling, and I met Jack Sword, who was then head of the Chamber of Commerce, and this head of our Employers' Association, and Frank Anderson of the Miners' Bank. My first reaction was, "What am I doing here? What if somebody gets a picture of me and sends it to New York? They'll throw me out of the union!" You know, I had been brought up in such a rigid framework. But it was an interesting conversation. What they were trying to do was get our organized union shops to take part in the Community Chest. That's what the whole meeting was about. I'd say it was around December 1944.

That did us a lot of good, which I didn't realize at the moment, because once we got into that phase we were sort of accepted by the elite. . . . Not that I wasn't walking on eggshells at first. But they were very supportive of us. . . . And then I had to explain it to our people, and they said, "You won't like it there, Min, and what are you going to get out of those old, you know. . . ." They would rather I fight than be [cooperative]. But I told them, "No, you see, the community's in trouble, and we need jobs, we need industry, and let me better be there and see who they're bringing." And for a while we worked with them. . . . We formed this Committee of 100 [for economic development], and I was on the committee. I think I got more education than they did! I told you I had a very lopsided background in training that was all labor. I didn't know from the other side. I didn't know about business problems, small business, big business, industrial troubles. I only knew labor's end, and it is important to have a more rounded view of the problems.

Mrs. Matheson's decision to work with high ranking community members signaled an evolution in organizing strategy from confrontation to cooperation,
Min and Bill Matheson at an ILGWU Christmas party in 1960.
from thinking as an outsider to working as an insider on behalf of the larger community. She also allied the union with the Democratic party, threw the union’s support behind Democratic candidates, and appeared on many programs with party officials, including Governors George Leader and David Lawrence and Presidents Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy. She became a prominent civic leader, serving also on the board of trustees of the local and the Pennsylvania United Fund and grew both as a person and as a union official. By linking the union cause with the community’s moral and civic high ground, Mrs. Matheson helped labor gain an entirely new sense of legitimacy among elites, who had traditionally opposed unions:

Everyone, I’m telling you, including the mayor, everybody was for us. And they admired what we were doing. We were very active in the community. We were active in the United Fund. We were active in the Red Cross blood donating. They could never have accomplished these things except that we took the leadership and told our people, “This we should do.” I think they supported us because they thought it was good for the community, for the people to have an organization as good as ours, that was so community conscious and upped the earning of the people, which made it better for the community. They were for us.

[United States] Representative Dan Flood helped us all the time. We helped him, and he helped us. With his mustache and mannerisms and all, he fitted just perfectly into what we were doing. So that, that only added to our public charm, if you know what I mean. And of course when he became an influential congressman, we helped to elect him.... And he always used to give us credit for sending him to Congress. Well, you know it was a lot of families and a lot of votes. He never voted wrong on any bill that would help this area, help the unemployed, do some good. He always voted right. I try to think of a single bill where Dan was wrong. With all that, he was an arch patriot. Too great a patriot for my views because, you know, I’m critical.

Her stature within the community and her highly successful union-building efforts notwithstanding, Mrs. Matheson’s actions did not always enjoy the support of the main office in New York:

See, there were a lot of internal fights in the union. Between the New York union and the Pennsylvania union there was always bad blood. Maybe I shouldn’t even tell you about this; I rarely ever talk about it. Of course, the shops ran away to get cheaper labor. But New York is a little like the Russians: what we do, you have to do.... And we always had to apologize, while we had the harder times and we were weaker, and all the time we’re fighting and working like hell and building a union and trying to build up conditions, but we
were always suspect because the wages weren't good enough, the conditions weren't good enough.

A serious conflict developed during a major strike in 1958 when Mrs. Matheson followed the questionable instructions of the head of the New York board:

Right after the '58 strike, they pulled us out again. They told us to strike again. It was only to suit New York's purposes and to disrupt our situation here. But if I failed to carry out the order, which was the decision of the general executive board—you know, there's discipline in the union. I was furious. I called [ILGWU president David] Dubinsky. We had the people out for a few days... Right after these few days of striking, I knew the pay envelopes would be depleted, and I was very, very unhappy about the whole action. Although the girls stayed out, I was just hoping they would say to me, "The hell with you," and work, that's how mad I was. It was a Thursday in the evening, and we were just closing up shop and this guy, my supervisor, called me up and he was in a rage. He must have just come out of a meeting where he likely had a big fight with the New York guys. And he said, "If he [Dubinsky] wants a strike, let him pay for it." That was the leader of the New York board. "Let him pay for it. I want you to pay twenty dollars to every striker for strike benefits, and I'll make him pay it back to you." I said, "We have a lot of people out." "Pay it. I want you to do it right away so they can't stop you...."

So I called the bank presidents, and I said, "I need fifty thousand dollars. We have to cover our shops. The girls were out, and we've got to give them twenty dollars so they'll have it to buy groceries." The banks cooperated. We had accounts in a couple of banks, and we got the money and Friday we passed it out. The girls were very surprised, you know. And when they started writing letters, the little devils, to Dubinsky thanking him for the strike benefits, we were surprised! He called me up, and he said he was surprised! And what right did I have to pay this strike benefit without authorization? Right away I knew there was big trouble. I could have answered and said [name] told me to do it, but I didn't because I realized instantly that he was in deep, dark trouble. I don't know why I did it. I can't even explain to you to this day. I never told Dubinsky the truth...

I went into New York and he [Dubinsky] was walking around talking in Jewish, Russian, and English and screaming, "Fifty thousand dollars! Fifty thousand dollars you gave away without permission. What made you do it?" He couldn't believe it. I said [to myself], that's the end of the strikes in Pennsylvania... They came in and took my treasury away. They told all the bank presidents that they were not to honor my signature or my checks.

As more shops were brought into the ILGWU fold, members' education and the quality of their nonworking lives took on increasing importance. The District
began an educationally oriented monthly newsletter, *Needlepoint*, edited by Bill Matheson, and organized a Political Club to empower members in the arena of government. A highly successful chorus as well as annual entertainment reviews bolstered morale, provided a social outlet, and also carried a political message. A union health center opened in Wilkes-Barre in 1948 and death and maternity benefits established. A college scholarship fund was initiated in the mid-1950s to advance the higher education of members and their children. Evening classes began at Wilkes College, offering a variety of history, economics, and other courses to workers who would not have otherwise attended college. The union became more than a pay-and-benefits organization. It became a community of sorts—an educator, social center, advocate and protector, and source of some security in an uncertain world.

**The Mathesons Leave the Wyoming Valley**

After shepherding the Wyoming Valley District for nearly twenty years, Min and Bill Matheson departed in 1963 for a new assignment in New York, with the ILGWU Union Label Department. Many local members protested the move. According to one newspaper account:

> Never has Greater Wilkes-Barre witnessed a demonstration such as the transfer of Mrs. Matheson evoked. The reaction not only attested to the loyalty she commanded from the rank and file of the union, but the esteem in which she was held in the community after two decades of service. . . . It was only after Mrs. Matheson had appealed to associates to put their loyalty to the union above all else that her transfer was approved [by the District].

More than seven hundred people attended a testimonial dinner for the Mathesons.

Min and Bill Matheson enjoyed the new assignment in New York, especially the creation of the new, and still current, ILGWU label. Yet, although New York had been their home for a decade and a place where they could count hundreds of friends and acquaintances, they sorely missed the Wyoming Valley. After ever more frequent visits, they decided to retire to their adopted community in 1972.

They returned to Pennsylvania just a few months before the devastating Tropical Storm Agnes flood of June 1972. “I’m an atheist,” says Mrs. Matheson, “but sometimes I think someone up there is doing something.” Her labor organizing skills proved most useful in establishing and leading the Flood Victims Action Council (FVAC), which she used to fight for victims’ interests in a highly political recovery. “They hated to see us coming,” she said of federal, state, and local offi-
cials who were the object of many FVAC protests. "There should be a statue of Min on public square for all that she had done for this valley," said Joseph Williams, a member of the Wilkes-Barre city council during the flood. Although no statue has been built, Mrs. Matheson's championing of the rights of garment workers was recognized in 1980 when she received the Mother Jones Award, an honor given annually by the Pennsylvania Labor History Society to outstanding labor leaders.

To the end of her life on December 8, 1992, Mrs. Matheson closely followed contemporary events. Her convictions and identity as a radical remained strong. She was proud of her early membership in the National Organization of Women, although she later resigned over policy matters. She asserted that, while the efforts of people like herself have resulted in some progress and that while unions have brought significant improvements in the lives of working people, there is nonetheless much cause for pessimism:

I'm disillusioned about human beings and their never-ending capacity to quarrel with each other about everything. You don't have to destroy someone else's reputation in order to make your own. And people do that all the time. And of course the trade union movement has become fat and rich and has walked away from a lot of the old principles and ideals. I miss that.

Postscript: Symbolic Meaning and Oral History

"My mother was a very good story teller," Betty [Matheson] Greenberg acknowledged, "because she had so many good stories to tell." Indeed, Mrs. Matheson brought a vivacious, people-centered story-telling style to the interviews, reflecting the vitality and humanism she brought to the shop floor and the union hall. She also brought a keen mind, a sharp memory, and powerful sense of purpose. But as Allesandro Portelli has pointed out, "Most oral narrators, folk storytellers and working-class historians have a tendency to couch their ideas in narrative form, thus leaving their discourse open to the possibilities of the untold, the symbolic, the implicit, and the ambiguous." Recurring themes, stories retold and overemphasized, errors of commission and omission, symbols of larger meaning—all these are important to consider in the interpretation of oral memoirs. Moreover, according to Luisa Passerini, oral narratives grow out of "specific traditions," which in turn rely on deeper historical and cultural substructures. Understanding these traditions and substructures also becomes important to the interpretive process.

As we try to interpret the Matheson interviews, we believe that organized crime not only emerged as the thematic center of the interviews but had a larger
symbolic meaning as well. Her battles with the criminal element encapsulated the deep personal meanings that stood at the center of Mrs. Matheson's entire life in labor. She was a fighter for workers' rights and a decent standard of living. Yet while her preoccupation with the underworld is entirely understandable given the near death of her father at the hands of the Capone mob, the actual murder of her brother Will by the New York mafia, and her father's death days thereafter, and while the Pittston shops were indeed the most difficult to organize, she nonetheless paid scant attention in her interviews to the vast majority of other shops in the region, which were not owned or controlled by crime bosses. Indeed, without fuller knowledge of the garment industry in northeastern Pennsylvania, Mrs. Matheson's emphasis on the underworld could lead one to believe that virtually all shops in the District came under the influence of organized crime. Although the mob may have intimidated more than half of the forty to fifty shops in the Pittston local, it actually owned only about fifteen to twenty, and only within this local. This overemphasis on the mob, therefore, suggests that the underworld stood as the key element in the mental substructure Mrs. Matheson brought to the interview. We conclude that her "specific tradition" of storytelling had its roots and trunk in Chicago and its branches in Pittston.

Thus, if oral history involves decision-making by a subject about how to articulate the relationship between the self and history, it seems reasonable to conclude that Mrs. Matheson made two decisions. The first was to present herself as unwaveringly dedicated to the fundamental principles of the American labor movement including the pursuit of social and economic justice. However, she also expressed a willingness to grow with the local situation, to integrate the union into the community, to use the community as a resource. Admittedly, this stands as a testimony to her flexibility and pragmatism. However, in terms of her self-presentation, her story, flexibility and cooperation became, in part, a way of outflanking, outmaneuvering, and outsmarting crime bosses and hence ultimately a way of upholding old principles and goals. The second decision she made in telling her story related to her view of organized crime as the quintessential enemy, an element that symbolized the ultimate clash between good and evil. For Mrs. Matheson, the conflict between management and labor became a thousand times magnified in the garment shops of Pittston. Her focus on organized crime, therefore, "lead[s] through and beyond facts to their meanings," and the key meaning in this case was the relentless pursuit of justice for labor, not against capitalism per se but against the excessive and brutal exploitation and injustice that she found at work in Pittston.
In summary, this article has relied on oral history to tell part of the story of Min Matheson and her efforts to organize runaway shops and built the ILGWU in the northern anthracite region of Pennsylvania. This largely untold account hopefully establishes her place in the company of other notable women organizers in the needle trades: Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Fannie Cohen, Dorothy Jacobs Bellanca, Rose Pesotta, and many others. The article also illustrates the importance of understanding the symbolic content of oral history interviews in order to appreciate the profound, subjective meanings through which “factual memories” are filtered.

Notes

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Denise Conklin, Betty Greenberg, John Justin, Clem Lyons, Dorothy Ney, and Jenny Silverman. A special debt of gratitude is owed Linda Shopes for her very helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.


3. The Knox Coal Company dug illegal chambers under the Susquehanna River, and on January 22, 1959, the river broke through, flooding virtually all mines in the northern anthracite region. Robert Wolensky is currently working on a history of the Knox Mine Disaster.


article makes no mention of ownership or influence by organized crime.

8. The ongoing Wyoming Valley Oral History Project, begun in 1982, now consists of 175 interviews; the final total is expected to be about 225. It is currently housed at the Center for the Small City, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP). In addition to the taped interviews, Robert Wolensky conducted one unrecorded interview with Mr. and Mrs. Matheson in 1973 lasting two hours, and he talked with Min Matheson further in several phone conversations and brief visits to her residence between 1982 and 1992. All quotations in the text have been taken from the transcripts of the three recorded interviews. Another taped oral history interview with Mrs. Matheson was conducted by Alice M. Hoffman on March 24, 1981, and is housed at the Historical Collections and Labor Archives of the Pennsylvania State University, University Park; the authors received it too late to incorporate in this article.


11. While protective of her husband, Mrs. Lurye did not in the final analysis understand his seemingly blind devotion to the labor cause, even at the expense of putting food on the table for his children. She eventually filed for divorce, according to Mrs. Matheson, so she could lead a more "normal" life.

12. Very recent evidence from an interview with Jennie Silverman, one of Mrs. Matheson's contemporaries and long-time friends, suggests that the move to New York was more circuitous and complicated than this. Further research is currently underway. Mrs. Silverman was interviewed by both authors on July 16, 1993, in New York City, a tape recording of which is in the possession of Robert Wolensky.


15. Kenneth Wolensky is currently conducting research on the history of the ILGWU's formal, informal, and informal educational programs in Pennsylvania from the early 1940s to the present. Information about these programs has been obtained from the Matheson oral history interviews and from a review of numerous issues of Needlepoint.


17. Joseph Williams, Taped Interview, August 13, 1984, Wyoming Valley Oral History Project, UWSP.

18. Bill Matheson had passed away at the age of ninety on April 14, 1987.


22. For obvious reasons, it is very difficult to determine the number of shops owned by crime syndicate members or otherwise controlled by them. According to Clementine Lyons and Dorothy Ney, both of whom worked closely with Mrs. Matheson, while actual ownership was
probably relatively small, perhaps no more than twenty shops, many other shops were controlled by the criminal element and even a larger number owned by people who were fearful of retaliation if they appeared friendly to the union. The situation was unquestionably most apparent in Pittston. See Taped Interview with Dorothy Ney, July 3, 1990, Wyoming Valley Oral History Project, UWSP; further information was provided by Mrs. Ney in a telephone conversation on June 26, 1993. See also Taped Interviews with Clementine Lyons, July 5, 1990, and July 24, 1992, Wyoming Valley Oral History Project, UWSP. Further information was obtained from taped interviews with two other individuals who worked closely with Mrs. Matheson, Mini Caputo on July 22, 1993, and Angelo DePasquale on July 23, 1993, Wyoming Valley Oral History Project, UWSP.

23. This concept is Luisa Passerini’s. See Smith, “Popular Memory,” p. 105.