

(Laborers Local 309 member Bill Stickey passed away in March 2010. He was 101 years old. Our condolences to his family and to Local 309.)

When people hear about “horse and buggy” days it conjures a time that seems long ago. But one Rock Island, Illinois Laborers Local 309 member marks over 70 years of union membership and remembers covered wagons, horse-drawn equipment, steam trains and his Model T.

Bill Stickney was born December 5, 1908 in the Amana colonies in rural Iowa. He remembers moving to Belle Plaine in a covered wagon and helping his father, who had a horse team, grade country roads. When asked at what age he started working, he couldn't quite remember, but did know “I was just a little punk” when he did.

He ran away from home twice, leaving for two-and-a-half years when he was in his teens. “I had a mind of my own,” he recalls. “That’s why my dad boxed me to side from side now and then.”

Like many youthful free spirits in the early 20th century, he hopped a westbound freight. He was occasionally arrested for vagrancy, “I spent a few days in some jug, locked up now and then” and eventually ended up in Denver, where he shoveled coal at ten cents a ton from a railroad car for the city’s water plant.

He well remembers a winter night he snuck aboard a fast passenger train, climbing atop the tender behind the locomotive. Laying flat on the tender deck he hung on through the night. “I had a big old army coat. When I got off it was frozen to the deck. I had to rip the coat just to get myself free.”

He eventually made his way back to Iowa, married, and then hit the road again, traveling south and west. He unsuccessfully tried to find work in Texas and eventually managed an early roadside motel in Arizona, where he maintained some small cabins and opened a small garage.

Then the Great Depression descended and Bill migrated back home to Iowa in 1932. He found work at the Farmall tractor factory, but disliked being indoors, “so I decided to try construction.” He first worked on the steep hillsides of Davenport, helping build roads, where “I drove three jugheaded mules to haul rock.” In 1936 he got his first job building with Priester Construction for 35 cents an hour. The next year he came back to Priester and joined then two-year old Local 309, though he said he had to fight his way in the first time he tried to attend a union meeting. Within a year he was elected the union’s president, a position he held for 15 years.

In winter months, when work slowed down, Bill usually found work, and throughout the World War II years roamed most of the 48 states, Canada and Mexico for the Buckeye Incubator Company of Springfield, Ohio. He delivered chicken incubators for farmers, the company paying his gas and oil plus one dollar a day for the use of his car.

Bill was well respected by Local 309’s membership. He remembers a business agent who wanted \$100 to help print and pay for election expenses for the local union election. Bill refused, saying



about the members, “If they want me, they’ll elect me.” He then went off on vacation and returned to find himself re-elected as the local’s president.

He retired in 1974, but remembers fighting with the local union’s members on establishing health and welfare and pension benefits. Most of the members wanted their money on the check, not in benefits. “We had some awful battles,” he recalls. “It took us five years to get it done. We couldn’t sell them (the members) on it.”

On the job Bill was a valued worker, often paid at the highest rate. But he also fought to insure every job was properly manned. He recalls one contractor who would try and do concrete pours with just one finisher. Bill first demanded overtime for the Laborers on the job, since they had to work more to keep up with the work. When that was refused, “I put a pair of boots out next to the pour and then stopped all the concrete trucks.” When the supervisor came running, wanting to know why the trucks weren’t pouring, Bill pointed to the boots and invited the supervisor to put them on and fill in for the missing man. “After that we always had enough help.”

His first car was a Model T and he regularly worked horses and other farm animals. He’s outlived his own family yet remembers well his life experiences.

When asked what he would tell today’s young workers, Bill said: “There ain’t nothing like a union. You can’t beat belonging to a union.”

Bill celebrated the century mark on December 5, 2009. Laborers Local 309 hosted a birthday party for him, presented him with resolutions and greetings from the International Union and the Midwest Region officers, and a gold Laborers watch. (*Below: 309 retirees honor Bill on his 100th birthday*).

