Interview with Julia Reichert

Victor Cohen

Julia Reichert was a filmmaker before she joined the Mad River chapter of the New American Movement (NAM) in Dayton, OH, but it was with this organization, and this chapter, that she and her partner, Jim Klein (also a member of NAM) made two significant documentary films on 20th century left history in the U.S. *Union Maids*, inspired by NAM members Staughton and Alice Lynd's *Rank-and-File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Beacon Press 1973), examined the lives of three Chicago women who were active in the labor movement of the 1930s and '40s. After the film was released in 1976, Reichert and Klein realized the significance of Communist Party, U.S.A. in these women's lives and embarked on a follow-up film, *Seeing Red*, which explored the history of the Party through first-person interviews with its members. Released in 1983, and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Seeing Red* played across the country to enthusiastic audiences and received an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature in 1984.

Today, Reichert continues to make films while working as a professor of film at Wright State University. Her most recent projects, produced and directed with Steven Bognar, include *A Lion in the House*, a documentary about five families dealing with pediatric cancer. This film won an Emmy in 2007 for Exceptional Merit in Nonfiction Filmmaking, was nominated for the 2006 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, and received a nomination for the 2007 Independent Spirit Award. *The Last Truck: the Closing of a GM Plant*, Reichert and Bognar's documentary on the last months of a GM plant in Moraine, Ohio as experienced through the eyes of the assembly line workers, aired on HBO in September 2009.

This interview was conducted by phone over the course of June 14 and July 26, 2009.

Victor Cohen: As a way of framing our discussion of your experiences as a filmmaker associated with the New American Movement [NAM], can you tell me a bit about *The Last Truck*, the film you're currently working on?

Julia Reichert: Sure. It's a short film about the closing of a General Motors plant in Ohio. It's different in some ways than the kind of work we would have done back then. It's a snapshot of a moment in time, a portrait of people facing the end of their plant and the end of their job, but also the end of their sense of what their future's going to be. This film is very much a portrait of working class people and is about giving them a voice. In that sense, it's exactly like what I

would have started to do back in 1970 or in NAM, let's say. But it doesn't try to analyze why GM failed, or the economic crisis in Ohio overall—I certainly think the film and the crisis it documents makes us wonder about capitalism; it's not a far stretch. But we would have made that connection much more explicitly back then than we do now.

I loved making that film. My brothers and the people in my neighborhood back in New Jersey are very much like the people in this movie, and it felt really good to be around their very caring, watch-out-for-each-other way of being. It's not like a lot of the rest of America, especially more the white-collar, competitive-type world. And I loved their sense of humor. Not that there's a lot of funniness in the movie, because it was a hard subject.

But it's also different because we're much better filmmakers—we know how to tell a story better, we know how to shoot better, we know how to take sound better. Yet it's more of a very little film. Back then [in the late '60s and in NAM] we were trying to make big films about big things, and make lots of connections with history. Even my last film, *A Lion in the House* [made with Steve Bognar about five families dealing with pediatric cancer], was a very big film.

Cohen: Do you recall what drew you to NAM? Were you already making films, or did your career as a filmmaker develop while you were a member?

Reichert: I started making films before I joined NAM. Jim Klein, my partner for 20 years, and I made a film called *Growing Up Female*, which was one of the first films of the second wave women's movement. It was used as an organizing tool to raise consciousness and to pull people into meetings and help create women's centers. NAM was not the beginning of my movement experience. I think that's true for many, many people in NAM.

Cohen: Were your parents on the Left?

Reichert: Not at all. My parents were Republicans and two of my three brothers are Republicans, as are many of the people I grew up with. I come from a very small town in southern New Jersey called Bordentown, Exit 7 of the New Jersey turnpike. I grew up as a working-class person. My dad was a union member; he brought his pay home in an envelope, cash. He went as far as the eighth grade and had a variety of jobs, from being a fisherman to working as an electrician, and as a meat cutter in a grocery store. My mom was a nurse.

Cohen: How did you end up moving in a different direction, politically, than your family?

Reichert: I was a restless type. Nobody in my family had ever gone to college. I started to send away for college catalogs when I was a freshman in high school, and I began with the A's—Albion, Amherst, Bates, but Antioch was the one that really appealed to me. The whole idea of Antioch—that you could work and travel—really made an

impression on me. That, and the fact that it was 600 miles away. Most everybody from my home town, if they went to college at all, went to Trenton State Teachers College; if they were really lucky or unusual, they went to Rutgers or Douglas.

On one of our vacations, we were driving across Ohio, and I knew we were coming within miles of Antioch. I begged my dad, "Please, please, please, can't we just take a short detour and let me go to this place?" He agreed. It was dusk, and when we walked onto campus there was a person playing a saxophone out of a window, and there were girls with long hair with guitars over their backs. My heart leapt. I ended up getting into a few schools, but I went to Antioch, and it utterly changed my life. Antioch and NAM are the shaping factors of who I am. Being a filmmaker, too, has had an impact, because that takes you to a lot of places and into a lot of challenges.

But my first experience at Antioch was very rocky. When I entered in the fall of 1964, we first sat around the hall and introduced ourselves, talking about where we were from and what our parents did. When I heard what other people said, like "my father's an engineer," "my father's an author," "my father's a professor," I immediately started lying to hide my working class background. I went two years, I dropped out, and much to everybody's surprise, I went back.

Cohen: When you came back, what changed for you?

Reichert: You mean, how did I become a lefty? It was a lot of small steps. In fact, I started at Antioch as a Republican and wrote an essay about why [Barry] Goldwater should win the presidential election. But my roommate and best friend Amy's parents had been Communists, and I'm sure that had a lot do with my political development. It wasn't their politics so much as the fact that they were just nice cool people who were thoughtful and knew stuff about the world, unlike my parents, who really didn't.

The pivotal moment for my political development took place during the march on the Pentagon in 1967. I loved taking pictures and was training myself to be a good photographer. Amy was going as a protestor, along with busloads of other people from Antioch. But I went there to be an observer, to take pictures of an important event. This was when people were putting flowers into the guns of the soldiers around the Pentagon. As I was taking pictures, Amy rushed the stairs of the Pentagon along with many other people and got her head split open. Blood was streaming down her face—my friend Amy, who I could see not far in front of me. Seeing her like that, I realized "I'm a part of this. I'm not just going to watch."

Cohen: When you got back to school, did you get involved with the antiwar movement?

Reichert: Yes. There was a thing at Antioch called RSI, the "Radical Studies Institute," which held informal classes and meetings around the antiwar movement. I started going, not as a serious lefty but just sitting in on meetings, classes.

Cohen: Was that organized by students, faculty, or both?

Reichert: Antioch's RSI was organized more by faculty, but students and faculty were very close at that point, and the lefty faculty was really young. There was a lot of filterless cigarette smoking in rooms that were jammed with people, and more and more jammed with people as time went on. The classes more often were in somebody's home, and weren't strictly Antioch classes. We all were in Marxist reading groups of one kind or another. I was learning a lot.

Cohen: What did it mean to be in these reading groups, for you?

Reichert: Well, my first answer would always be, it helped me feel like I could have a place in history. I was learning about my own class background, which was hugely empowering. (laughs) You know, "Wow, we working class people can be agents in history. We don't need to be embarrassed about the fact that we don't know Sartre or what a metaphor is."

It was also, "Well, how do we overthrow capitalism?" Every month something was jumping off. We had to stop the war, we had to end racism, we were learning about imperialism, capitalism, socialism, and communism. It was incredibly eye-opening.

Cohen: And it wasn't an academic practice.

Reichert: Well, we did read, but it was much more about what we were going to do about the world situation, and how were we going to play a part in it. We were in little Yellow Springs, right? But there was activism going on all over the place in the Midwest.

But here's the crucial thing: at these meetings, it was all men who talked. There was an occasional woman, but clearly she had to struggle to speak. Not that we were really conscious of that, of course, but it didn't take much for you to stop and realize, "What the hell is going on here? Is this really equality?"

At one point, probably around 1968, my roommate Amy came back from Gainesville, Florida where she had been in a CR group—a consciousness-raising group; it was the first time I ever heard of this. She was on the phone at one point—and she said, "I'm into this new thing; it's called 'women's liberation.'" And I literally started laughing, thinking, "What a ridiculous idea. 'Women's liberation'? Why do we have to be liberated?" We were about Black liberation, anti-imperialism, Vietnam. A few minutes later I got off the phone and I was talking to a couple guys in my hall, one of whom was my boyfriend, and I said, "Amy's into this new thing; it's called 'women's liberation,'" and they started laughing way louder than I was. Then they started shaking me, hard, subduing me in a symbolic way, and that really was scary, because that showed me that at a gut level, this threatened them.

Things happened real fast after that. She came back, and we started the first CR group at Antioch with five women. I started a radio show called "The Single Girl," and that song by Peter, Paul and Mary—(sings) "I wish I was a single girl"—was my theme song. I played all

that anti-women rock, "Under My Thumb," and songs by blues women—"my man done left me." That was late '68 or early '69. Then it became "Sisters, Brothers, Lovers: Listen." After my radio show started going on, guys would come up to me. I remember one saying, confrontationally, "I listen to your radio show. You don't really mean that, do you?" People would literally shake their fist at me, these big guys. It was really something, how even progressive men at Antioch at first reacted to that.

The CR group went for some months with just five women. Then we started getting a little bigger. We met once a week, and eventually we went to one of the RSI meetings, a few of us, and we brought up the fact that women weren't speaking as much. We were scared shitless. The reaction of the leadership (all guys) was very negative, very mocking. So we asked the women to come out of the room and leave, and most of us stormed out, walked down the hall and claimed a room. There was an empty room, and we said, "This is going to be a women's center," and it became The Antioch Women's Center, and remained so for decades. I'll never forget the moment we got a phone installed.

The women's movement was very motivating and empowering. I ended up becoming a leader in Yellow Springs, and I led CR groups and spoke. It was at this point that *Growing Up Female* was made in 1970. My partner, Jim, and I shot it in the spring. We had become a couple around '68. He was interested in audio; I was interested in photography. It meant a lot that I had a partner who shared my interests. Jim was also a part of the radio station WYSO-FM—he was their engineer, in fact. Radio and film are not that far apart. That's how I learned how to interview, tell a story, and how to edit—on the radio.

Cohen: Did the women's movement at Antioch become your focus, exclusively?

Reichert: Not really. I became less into RSI because they were so unresponsive, but I was still in Marxist study classes with some of the male teachers and other guys. I wasn't one of those women who became anti-male; class was so important to me—being working class, fighting for working class equality. But once we got the film done in 1970, getting it out took over our lives.

It was a pretty heady moment in general, though. I graduated in 1970, and my father died a few weeks before. The spring of '70 was when Kent State happened, and that's also when the U.S. invaded Cambodia. My last conversation with my father was about Kent State. It was one thing after another. All the colleges were closing down. We were in meetings all the time—the entire cafeteria would be taken over every night with debates and planning.

But then Jim and I left for nine months, and everything changed when we came back. Jim—he's three years younger—was going Antioch Education Abroad, and I went with him. In June, we traveled all over Europe, and then in the fall while Jim studied in London, I stayed and worked in the vineyards in France. And when we came back, groups were just getting started like the R.U. (the Revolution-

ary Union, which later became the RCP [The Revolutionary Communist Party], the O.L. [the October League], the Weathermen). On top of that, a number of my women friends who had been in those expanded CR groups had become separatists. They were living with other women, had become lesbians, were not talking to men, and were forming their own communes. All that happened while I was gone. My head was spinning when I got back.

Cohen: Why didn't you join one of those groups?

Reichert: Lots of reasons. I think I somehow knew that I wanted a larger, broader audience. I had a film that I hoped was going to be seen around the country. I was less likely to join because they required huge life commitments, and a lot of them were secretive. Their ideas had radicalized a lot, the talk was tougher, and there were competing organizations. But because we'd made that film, and probably because we missed the formative few months, we didn't join. Once the film came out, I started traveling the country getting it shown, and that on its own was a transformative process.

For several months I traveled by bus with one film print, contacting people. I'd call a contact I'd made in [Washington] D.C. and they'd say, "Let's meet in my living room. I'll call my women friends together." We'd keep all the addresses, and then someone would say, "Well, I know somebody in New York," and I'd call them, and we'd show it in a high school. I went to Boston, Cleveland, Athens, Ohio, I remember I eventually got invited to Norman, Oklahoma. It was some university connection. That's where I was threatened on the stage, physically, by a couple of guys after the showing. And it's really a gentle film. I'll never forget that.

Cohen: How did you decide to make the movie?

Reichert: It was my Antioch senior project. I wanted to make a film about the situation of women—not about the women's movement, but as a way to support it. *Growing Up Female* is just six portraits of ordinary women, people who grew up like me, and is about an hour long. There is a 4-year-old, 12-year-old, 16-year-old, two 21-year-olds, and a 35-year-old. It's quite a period piece, but it's still used.

What also influenced us to make the movie was the Newsreel group. They were really important nationally during this time. They produced and distributed movies for working class and movement organizing. They made a lot of these black-and-white, 16-millimeter movies. It was based in New York City, as I recall, but there were chapters in various places, including Antioch. It was not an open group like RSI or the Women's Center, where anyone could come on in. We had friends in the group but never joined. Through their work, though, and their worker and community screenings, we could see that films could be used to bring people together and to radicalize them.

After we'd made *Growing Up Female*, though, Newsreel didn't want to distribute it. At the same time we had made our film, News-

reel had put out *The Woman's Film*. It was similar in many ways, but it ended with a call for revolution and was much more overtly class and race conscious. It was not as well-made, not as funny, though it's an important film. In fact, I'm showing it this week in my "Women in Independent Film" class. But because we wanted to use our film in the same way Newsreel did, we had to figure out how to distribute it. Regular distributors who would normally take on your film didn't know what women's groups even were. We would ask them, "We want to have our film shown in women's prisons"—there was a lot of organizing going on in women's prisons—and they would say, "They don't have any money, do they?" So we had to learn how to do it ourselves. I wrote a book later called *Doing It Yourself: a Handbook on Independent Film Distribution* [Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers 1977], which was a handbook for that kind of stuff for many years.

The whole Antioch "thing," too, was that you go out and work and create your own institutions. We did that with the WYSO radio station, we created the Women's Center, so we felt we could learn film distribution as well. To distribute *Growing Up Female*, we formed New Day Films in the spring of '71. It still exists today. It's a filmmaker cooperative for social-issue films and has about 100 filmmakers. It started out with a focus on women's films, then took on a feminist film about men, and then gradually became oriented towards social-issue films in general.

Cohen: When NAM forms in 1972, were you still around Antioch?

Reichert: Yes. Jim was graduating, we were living in Yellow Springs, and some of the professors who were involved with the RSI group, like John McChesney who retired from National Public Radio recently, brought the idea of the New American Movement to Antioch. We got the word, Jim and I—"Hey, there's this thing forming; it's called New American Movement. Come on over to have dinner and we'll have a meeting."

So, we started having meetings, and that was where we got to know people from Dayton, great activists who were also interested in forming NAM, one of whom was also a radio person as well, Mark Miracle, the news director of KPFA in Berkeley radio today. After a few meetings, we heard NAM was having a convention, so we all piled in our cars and we drove there. We liked it, joined, and moved to Dayton specifically to become a part of its New American Movement chapter, which ended up having at least 35 people. That experience really shaped our lives. We could have moved anywhere; we were filmmakers. Most of our friends in film were in New York, Cambridge, or San Francisco. But we were going to put our roots down in a working-class community, and we in NAM were going to make change in smaller cities all over the country.

That was always the idea of NAM—we were going to live and work in real neighborhoods, and work on a more general, open level with people. We did not see ourselves as a vanguard. We saw ourselves as activists, but it was not just to get the stop light put in at the

end of the street, or to get the garbage picked up, or to get the utility rates lowered, or even just to create a women's center. It was to use these issues as a way to reach more people and raise consciousness about the need for a new kind of economic system, as well as equality between women and men. We thought there had to be a mass movement, with lots and lots of people; we could bring the unions in, we could bring feminists or women's liberation people in, we could bring civil rights and Black power people in, all under one big umbrella all fighting for a transformed America. We felt as open NAM members, we could be good leaders or good coalition members in other organizations as well.

Cohen: Did you see your role in NAM as a filmmaker or media person more generally?

Reichert: NAM meant a great deal to me particularly as a media person. I understood the power of it because of my experience with *Growing Up Female*, and NAM understood that. It didn't view us—to which I credit Richard Healey—as an "arm of the party" like the old CP [Communist Party U.S.A.]. I remember discussions with Richard that we should not be seen as utilitarian. NAM understood that you had your own expression as a cultural worker, which is what we called ourselves back then, rather than "artist." I'm a cultural worker, like my dad was a butcher, like my mom was a nurse.

It was great. NAM recognized that we needed to reach a broader number of people, not just other college students or the urban proletariat. When Newsreel rejected *Growing Up Female*, you can see right there, well before NAM, that our instincts, Jim's and mine, were to make popular media that would reach a lot of people. I think that comes out of my class background, honestly. I always said when we were editing a film that my mom was sitting over my shoulder. I had to make films that she would enjoy, get something out of, and not feel alienated by.

Cohen: It's interesting that you contrasted your film, *Growing Up Female*, which you felt had humor, to the Newsreel film, *The Women's Film*, which did not. I've heard many times from NAM members about how much fun they had in the organization. Could you talk a bit about why that's such a significant thing to mention? It seems like such a minor point, yet it's come up repeatedly.

Reichert: I think that distinguished NAM folks. We saw ourselves as a trying to create a culture that was pro-human, that encouraged people to become full human beings, fighting to support people's ability to cooperate and fight together—in really broad strokes. That was fun. Our NAM chapter—especially the Media House—was known as having the best parties in all of Dayton, and we were really proud of that. We had big parties with pot and beer and popcorn, and wild and great and amazing dancing. And we believed in knowing the latest music, Motown, reggae, and when disco came along, some of our folks really learned how to dance that way and used to go into Dayton clubs at night and dress up and do that whole

thing. That may sound strange, but that was fine—it was cool to do that, as opposed to how other Left groups felt, who said, "You're wasting time having these big parties." We did play softball with them, though. They viewed that as an acceptable working-class activity, I guess. It was fun to be with them.

We met some great people in NAM, among them Staughton Lynd. And it was through him that we decided to make our next big film, with Miles Mogulescu, *Union Maids*. This film would have never occurred if it hadn't been for the New American Movement.

Cohen: When did you start making it?

Reichert: 1974, as I recall. At the NAM conventions, you would meet people from other parts of the United States who shared your interests—there'd be a women's caucus, and if I remember correctly, there was something like a culture caucus where we met Miles, who became our good friend. Like us in the Dayton Media House, he too was interested in talking about what our role as filmmakers or as video makers should be. Are we supposed to give voice to the voiceless? Are we supposed to not only do that, but move people forward? Should we be making media that gives NAM and its politics a bigger voice? How do we call for radical social change? We would exchange articles and have discussions. I remember reading Gramsci in that context, though I also remember reading *Talks in the Yenan Forum in Literature and Art* by Mao. Lenin had a few things to say about cinema, as I recall.

We really were struggling for a model. You made films in the real world to get to Hollywood, to advance your career, to win an Oscar. That wasn't why we were making films.

We did have predecessors. There was the Film and Photo League from the 1930s, which we knew about, and even Newsreel, which we were surrounded by, who would make these short, very militant films and show them in factories, on picket lines, in neighborhoods; we admired that a lot, actually. But we wanted to make things that were a little more lasting, a little more beautiful, a little more mass-oriented.

One day, Miles came to Dayton to visit, and he had made this little videotape he wanted to show us. He had gone to Staughton and Alice Lynd's book, *Rank and File*, in which they'd collected twenty-five interviews with working-class organizers in Chicago from the '30s, '40s and so forth, and three of them were women—only three. So Miles went to Chicago where these three women lived, found them, did these basic interviews and cut them together into a short video. Their stories were great. I looked at it and I said, "Miles, we should do this again and make it as a real movie." We took it to Jim, and he said, "Okay." We were working on another film at the time, *Methadone: An American Way of Dealing*, about methadone treatment and the negative effects it has on its users. We shot *Union Maids* while we were finishing this other film, and that's why *Union Maids* didn't come out until '76.

Cohen: How did you go about making the film?

Reichert: With Miles's help, we set up interviews with these same three women, but we planned out the questions a lot more, and we had two cameras so we could cut back and forth and make it look a lot better. Jim and I edited the film in the NAM Media House, up on the third floor. As we were editing these women's stories, I discovered how to integrate old footage from actual strikes and events into the film, as a way to help contextualize the stories. I had never seen it done in a movie. We started screening the rough cut to get feedback, and I noticed whenever moving film footage came on the screen—as opposed to the stills we had been using—people just leaned forward in their chairs. And I thought, "We have to go to the ends of the earth to get moving archival footage of any of this stuff!" So we went to the National Archives. It was tough because if you tried to find "women" in the card catalog, or "women workers," and "women strikers," there would be nothing. Then we realized when I was looking up something else, there was a category called "girls." And that's where they all were! Then there'd be card after card after card: "girls working," "girls on picket line," "girls' sit-down" —but it was all "girls!" I'd look for "strikes"; there were a few. But then I started thinking the same way: "What about calling them 'riots'?" and yes! There they were. "Workers riot"; "workers' insurrection. . ."

We also went to unions to get that footage. I'd talk with, say, the garment workers' union offices in New York, and they'd say, "Yeah, we have some old films…", and we'd go visit, look in a back room and find an old shoebox with a couple of reels of film in it, 16-millimeter, hundred-foot loads. So we'd make a copy of the footage and edit shots into the film. It was so exciting, finding these images of our history that were more or less lost. And as we added more and more moving footage moving to the stories, the stories came more and more alive.

Cohen: Chronologically speaking, you started *Union Maids* in '74?

Reichert: We shot it in '74, and edited it until '76. We finished it in '76, the year of the Bicentennial. The Left had a big response to the Bicentennial, which NAM of course talked a lot about.

Cohen: There was a huge demonstration in Philadelphia for that in which NAM participated, correct?

Reichert: Yes; my entire NAM chapter went, except for Jim and me because we were editing this film. Harry Boyt was a big advocate of our involvement with the Bicentennial. That was the great thing about NAM, that there was such a range of opinion. He and others argued that we need to be claiming the American flag, not rejecting it, that we need to make ourselves a part of American history. Other people were arguing that we had to reject it because of the racist and genocidal history of the U.S. itself. That's a very rough description of that discussion, but the debates around '76 were wonderful. The film came out after that—we premiered it on May Day, 1976. Our first screening was in Dayton on April 30, but the first major screening was in San Francisco the next day. It was a huge hit. A

friend in NAM was out there—NAM promoted it—and said people really loved the film. We didn't know how people were going to react.

Cohen: Really?

Reichert: Of course not. We thought the look of the thing would turn people off, because it was shot on one-inch, open-reel videotape and transferred to film because we wanted to be able to project it in movie theaters. We thought that would be a cheap way for leftists to be able to make movies: to shoot on video and transfer onto film, as opposed to shooting on film. In the end it cost more, so that experiment was a big failure, and it looks much worse that way. But the stories take over, so people were able to look beyond that. It got shown across the U.S., in mainstream theaters. We were reviewed in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Daily News*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and many, many others. Reviewers loved the film, too. And then later the Oscar nomination! That was a complete shock.

Cohen: How were you supporting yourselves while you were doing all of this?

Reichert: That's a good question. Shooting on videotape was very cheap. Miles worked on a public access television station in Minnesota, so we were able to get the equipment for free. We owned an editing machine, so that was free. But what earned us money was being in distribution with *Growing Up Female*. A print of the film was $600 to buy, and it cost us only $100 to make. Over the years we sold hundreds of prints, and it mostly went to us because we had the New Day Films co-op.

Cohen: I know NAM chapters certainly showed the film. Were there other political groups that used it?

Reichert: Sure. It was used on picket lines; the AFL-CIO eventually bought a copy. I heard they cut out the part about socialism in the print they bought. It got used a lot in women's centers, in women's studies departments. It's still used, believe it or not, in a lot of introductory labor history classes. More than any film I've ever worked on, that film is known. You'd be surprised at how many young people come up to me and tell me they saw that film in their history class.

Of course, to make it useful to NAM, we had to educate people how to use films. One of our goals within NAM as cultural workers was to help people learn how to use films for organizing. So we wrote a short booklet on how to do a film screening. It included everything, like how to test your projector and your sound, how to set up a screen (even that you needed a screen!), how to get tickets, publicize your screening, and so on. Also, every year at NAM conventions—for a while, anyway—we would pull together the really good political films of that year and show them so people could

know what was available for their organizing. We knew a lot of filmmakers and we'd get copies and bring them to the national convention. And we provided a list to everybody who came, and how to get the films. We really tried to make films a part of what every chapter would do, and we really had some inroads; I think NAM used a lot more films and videos than other leftist groups because of that.

Cohen: Did the films you shot support the Media House, or was that set up differently?

Reichert: The Media House was part of Mad River (Dayton) NAM, and we had our own approach to funds at the house. The Media House—215 Superior Avenue, Dayton, Ohio—is its own amazing story. We started the house in'74 and right from the beginning decided that whatever any of us earned we would put into a single bank account, and out of that, we would pay for the mortgage, food, and all of our bills, and give ourselves a $5 dollar a week allowance. The only thing that was separate was our funds from New Day—it had started before Media House, and while we contributed a big share to the house, we had an employee and an office, so we kept things separate to do that work.

There were seven of us in the house, so every night someone else cooked. We had weekly meetings every Sunday night where we'd divide up our jobs, and if there were issues, we brought them up then as well. We did media projects together, and that would come up too, but the Sunday meetings were really house meetings.

Cohen: What were the projects you did as the Media House, apart from the films you were working on?

Reichert: At the time, the work we did as the Media House was more important than anything, including the films. We decided as a group of seven living in our neighborhood in Dayton that we were going to do local media. This came out of our theoretical work that we'd been doing. We started our media work in the summer of'75.

We chose three neighborhoods to focus on. We would walk up and down the streets with a camera and tape recorder and start talking to people about their dogs, their gardens, their concerns, and gradually we'd try to find the issues in this tiny four- or five-block neighborhood. In my area, Mary Avenue, there was a conflict between young people who had moved in and the older residents. "The kids played their music too loud," "The kids were messy," "The old people don't respect us." So we would talk to one side and the other, and then we'd put together these beautiful slide shows with documentary sound on a huge screen in the neighborhood park, and we'd leaflet and say, "Come see the show." Everybody'd bring their lawn chairs and they'd see the slide show. If one of their neighborhoods had a band, they'd play first, or the kids would do a tumbling act, and then we would show our slide shows, which were very entertaining and funny.

At first we presented strictly issues in that neighborhood, then we began to add in, for instance, how there was a push to get utility

rates lowered so that people who were poor and old would not be shut off in the middle of winter. Or we'd make a point to talk with women in the neighborhood about their concerns, and then the show would note the new women's center nearby. NAM worked on both of those issues—utility rates and a women's center—but in coalition with many others.

Cohen: What were these neighborhoods like?

Reichert: Well, we went into neighborhoods that we could walk to. There was a white, very Appalachian working-poor neighborhood. Then there was a mixed, integrated neighborhood, and there was a black neighborhood not far away from that. We recruited local people to work with us and taught them how to use the cameras and tape recorders; we shot only slides and developed our own slide film in the basement.

Cohen: How did the people react when they saw these slideshows?

Reichert: They loved them. After a while, the neighbors would see us walking down the street and they'd say, "Come on over here, I got something I want to talk to you about. Turn your tape recorder on." The shows were called "Summer Lights," and of all the work I've done, this is the thing I am most proud of. We did it for just two summers, and it was wonderful. If you talk to any of us who were in the Media House I believe they will all tell you the same.

Cohen: How did you start working on *Seeing Red*, your next film after *Union Maids*?

Reichert: We were at the Dayton premiere of *Union Maids*; all three of the women in the film were there, too. They'd come down from Chicago, along with Alice Lynd.

After the movie, we all came back to the Media House, and we were sitting around the butcher-block kitchen table: Vicky, Sylvia, and Kate [the women interviewed in the film], Jim and me, and the Media House people. As these women were starting to relax and tell stories, they began to use words like "the movement," and then they started to use the word "the party," and we were confused. I remember we said, "What are you talking about?" And then we realized that they had all been in the Communist Party.

Cohen: All the women in *Union Maids*?

Reichert: Yes. They all knew each other because of the Communist Party, even though they worked in different sectors. Katie had actually been a Communist Party organizer. We were stunned that they never said anything about it. To be fair, we didn't ask them, either. I don't think they were exactly hiding anything. But we just didn't know about it!

Jim and I were sitting in bed very shortly after that, and I remember Jim saying, "You know what? We should make a film about the

Communist Party." We both kind of laughed, and then I said, "You know what? We should." And it stuck in my mind. That night, when we saw them together laughing, talking, telling bawdy stories, we could see that it wasn't just a political history, but a personal one. The Communist Party members were the people from whom they took lovers, were in study groups and learned with, as well as the folks with whom they picketed and organized. We saw, in their laughter and their closeness, that this was a whole life.

Seeing Red came directly out of *Union Maids*, and it was bolstered by the learning we were doing in NAM. We were in study groups ourselves and meeting old leftists like Dorothy Healey and veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. From these folks, we were beginning to get the dimensions of what the Communist Party had been.

Cohen: Can you say more about the relationship between the two films?

Reichert: Well, *Seeing Red* came out of the unanswered questions of *Union Maids*. I think you always make films about questions you have for yourself, rather than things you think other people are going to want to see.

Cohen: What was the unanswered question in *Union Maids*?

Reichert: The unanswered question was, how did all these women learn to do what they did? How did it all happen? It wasn't just through a grassroots workers movement, which is the impression *Union Maids* leaves you with. A more direct version of that question was, "What was the relationship of the Left—the Communist Party—to this insurgent labor movement that formed the CIO [the Congress of Industrial Organizations]?" It was a significant one for us, in NAM, because we were trying to figure out how could we have a relationship like that, one which could help produce the CIO, the unemployment councils, unemployment insurance, social security, the five-day work week. We felt that to resurrect the radical history of America was going to help the radical movements of our own time.

Cohen: So you started making *Seeing Red* while *Union Maids* was in distribution, in '77?

Reichert: Yes. Unlike *Union Maids*, though, this was very much researched. I started amassing books and I read everything I could get my hands on. We also had had a taste of what it means to have a theatrical film with *Union Maids*, and we wanted to see if we could make a feature-length color film that would get widespread release. This story was worth all of that. And it was our fourth film—we felt we were ready.

We also knew we had to raise real money—you can't do this kind of project on a shoestring, like *Union Maids*. So, in the waning days of the Carter administration, we applied for, and got, a fairly sizeable grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities, $160,000, and we later got another $40,000 or $50,000. And that let us shoot

in color, with a real cinematographer. It let us hire a full-time archival researcher for two years and buy amazing film stock.

The biggest question we faced was a practical one, though—how do you get Communists to talk about being Communists?

Cohen: Right—especially since you'd just done a film on three Communist Party members about their activism, and they didn't mention any of this to you.

Reichert: No, not in ways we understood. Mentioning that you wrote for *The Daily Worker* didn't mean anything to me. Finding people was a huge challenge as well. We started with the women in *Union Maids*, and with a few parents of NAM members who had been members of the Party. We first went to Chicago where we knew these three women and began researching the Communist Party and its relationship to the labor movement in that city. But we wanted to focus on the social and personal life of members as well—the women's movement helped us there.

But it was slow. One person would call another person and say "Look, these are the people who made *Union Maids*; you can trust them." And then these people would interview us first, asking us why we were making this film and who we were. There was a lot of fear, still, and this was in the late 1970s. A typical story went like this: "My daughter is the superintendent of schools here, and if the papers get a hold of the fact that her mom or dad was in jail, or red-baited, or was an out-front Communist, that could hurt her standing in the community." We heard this over and over again, around the country, especially from women. Somehow the men were not as worried.

So we'd gain the trust of one person, and say "Who else would you suggest?" And we'd go and talk to them, and have a few meetings, and then we'd record an interview. And they'd have a good time in the interview and recommend someone else. That's one reason it took six years to make the film. It took several years just to get people's trust and confidence.

Cohen: While this is going on, NAM was slowing down in the sense that it can't quite draw people like it used to. We're in the 1980s now, in your story; NAM and DSOC [the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee] are merging. Did that have any impact on Mad River NAM or the Media House?

Reichert: Yes. NAM was slowing down on a national level. It was very good from '74 to about the early '80s, which is about the length of time the Media House existed. We started to disband in 1980. I say "disband" only because one person decided he didn't want to live in a collective; instead, he moved down the street and still came to meetings. We also had our daughter in '79, and that had an impact on us and the house, because now it had a baby in it. I distinctly remember the merger meeting and how sad it was.

Cohen: Was your NAM chapter supportive of the merger?

Reichert: No, we were not. But we weren't the kind of chapter that left NAM because of that. We were skeptical, but we could see the dwindling power of NAM and that some of the hopes of bringing in the union movement, or of having national fights around issues, were not coming to fruition.

Cohen: Was *Seeing Red* done and entering into distribution when the Democratic Socialists of America [DSA] was formed?

Reichert: DSA was very much involved. And the film was a big success. It was actually chosen for the New York Film Festival in October of '83, and the release was in spring of '84. Many screenings were big fundraisers, and a lot of money was raised; it was a high profile movie. The San Francisco event was fantastic. We packed the Castro Theater, and Alice Walker spoke—she even read a poem she had written for that day. Overall, it played in one hundred movie theaters. Think of that. We had a huge screening in Boston, a huge screening in Chicago, and one in L.A. too. They all earned money, and the film was reviewed positively, for the most part, in all the daily papers. Roger Ebert gave us a very nice review, even.

Cohen: It is hard to imagine that a documentary about the Communist Party did well in 1984.

Reichert: Well, within the Left it was very controversial. The Communist Party hated it. We got a negative review in *The Daily Worker* because it felt the film didn't acknowledge the current power and strength of the Communist Party. There was a long review in *The Nation* on how we didn't come down harder on the Hitler-Stalin pact. Maurice Isserman, whom we met while making the film, was one of the few people doing similar kinds of work we were, revisiting the history of the Old Left from the standpoint of the New Left and honestly trying to evaluate and recover what these people had done. He wrote a nice response to *The Nation*, though we never did. The way we felt was, stopping the film's narrative to talk about people's relationship with the Trotskyists in the 1930s was not relevant to audiences in 1984. We were making a mass film for a wide audience.

What was so amazing about these screenings is that they brought out both the Old Left and the New Left. After the film ended, you'd hear someone stand up and say, "Thank you. I can finally admit I was a member of the Communist Party." Then someone across the hall would say, "Me too." And then a young leftist someone-else would say, "Can we talk afterwards? I want to know your story." This happened all the time, which is one of the things we were hoping for. Another thing that would happen is that, for example, in Vermont after a screening, a guy came up and said, "I'm a Republican; I voted Republican my whole life. Thank you for this movie because I thought Communists were all a bunch of Soviet spies." For people like that, it was a myth-shattering kind of movie.

Every week, in the Media House, we would talk about the kinds of projects we wanted to produce. We asked ourselves how to connect with the people we lived around, and even how we should

comport ourselves and be good partners in the different coalitions we were participating in. At the same time, we were always asking ourselves, how could we raise the more radical issues? We were always working at that intersection, and that's where I am still as a filmmaker—working to reach a mass audience, but trying to get them to question the system. And be open to changing it.

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