

**Leon Murphy**

JSF: This is an oral history interview with Mr. Leon Murphy on July 13, 2005 at Howe Press at Perkins School for the Blind. The interviewer is Jan Seymour-Ford. Sound check for the oral history interview with Mr. Murphy. Sound check with the air conditioner and fan off for the oral history interview. Just for the record, Mr. Murphy, would you tell us your full name and your place of birth, and if you'd like to tell us, your date of birth?

LM: Leon Murphy. I'm from Watertown Massachusetts. I was born December 21, 1935.

JSF: Thank you. OK, first of all when did you come to Perkins?

LM: I came to Perkins in February of 1960.

JSF: And what brought you here? What, what, what particular job?

LM: What brought me here was I was, I was a convalescent as a young kid and I was born and raised in Brighton and I was in the hospital, it was beyond the war, I was having a hard time finding places just (inaudible) places open their doors, (inaudible) places hospital in 19, I think it was 1944 or 1943, and I was, I was there for the summer of that year. I think it was Dr. Carroll that left, I'm not sure.

JSF: Yeah, it would have been, yeah.

LM: And it was very convenient for me because my mother couldn't drive and my father was deaf. That way I was able to see my family whereas before I was either in Children's Hospital or different convalescent homes, but. That's where I came to know Perkins. After I got out of the service, in '58, I had a job as a truck driver and then I found that Perkins was hiring so I came in and I talked to David Abraham and told him I would like to work for him and he hired me.

JSF: Well great. So what was your first job here when you started?

LM: The first job I had here was as a print press operator.

JSF: That for the Braille stereotypers or?

LM: No, it's a big punch press down at the back of the room, the A, the big A press was the one I started on, and Abraham showed me how to set it up, how to run it, how to feed it and and punch the parts out.

JSF: So it's Braille press.

LM: Yeah. And then from there, nobody had one set job. You'd have something different almost every day you came into the shop. Some days you work on a punch press. Some days on a lead, some days on a lower, some days on a center or belt center, about five units straightening. You always had something different.

JSF: Wow.

LM: You just, everybody was located. You weren't just, that's where you got to know all the parts and be able to check all the parts.

JSF: So did you like working that way?

LM: I loved it. It wasn't boring. It was very interesting, and it's a change of pace. It was fun.

JSF: So what was it like to work under David Abraham?

LM: He was a very hard person to work for. He was very meticulous, very precise, and everything had to be just so, and he was the type of man that if you had a pan of parts, say six seven parts, thousand parts in a pan, he'd put his hand in and grab one, and you'd think, that keeps every damn side in. But that's what the way he was, and he'd make me go through the whole thing and check every one of them, and if it wasn't right, he'd stop the operations and check them.

JSF: Wow.

LM: So I only worked in the shop oh for about eight months, nine months, and then he put me in the assembly room and I started assembling Brailers, and then I became the assistant to the supervisor in here and then I started doing most of the repair work and I've been doing that ever since.

JSF: So why do you think you got shifted to a different area?

LM: Where?

JSF: How come?

LM: How come? Well, it was just the way it was then. Some days it was left, you know David Abraham's philosophy that if they're going to build something, build it all, know every part, know what you're supposed to be looking for. When we used to get final assemblers, in order to get a final assembler, you would have to have done every assembly help in the shop before you were even considered as coming in here.

JSF: Wow.

LM: That way if anything happened to the machine, you knew where to look for the problem. If it was in the drum, you'd make the drum before. You made the chain castings. You made the in plates, you made the feed rollers, the line space levers, the carriages, so you know what to do. So it made it a lot easier on the front with the assemblers.

JSF: So it feels like a philosophy that, that really made a lot of sense.

LM: Now they don't do that any more because you haven't got the manpower any more. Now it's all automatic.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: But so and then we don't build much any more either.

JSF: Right.

LM: But it was fun.

JSF: So could you describe like when you first began here, what was a typical day for you?

LM: Well normally when we came in, after you punched in, we'd, I believe we started at a quarter of eight in the morning and we left at 4:30 in the afternoon. We worked eight and three quarter hours when I first started but that wasn't all of the time. Some show up regular I think.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: Some want to, the labor who would found a (inaudible) change, but anyway. No, you'd come in in the morning and Freddy Lehman who was the shop foreman at the time would tell you what you were going to work on. You're going to work on the blade, you're going to work on the Moller, you're going to work on the punch press, and he'd give you a print and a set of mikes and you'd be able to check your part and set it up and you'd follow it through. It was our responsibility. And then at the end of each day, you'd stop at ten past four and you'd clean up your machine and sweep it all into a pile and by the next morning the janitor would come by and pick up all the piles so we got nice clean machines and a clean floor to start up with. But every day it was something different, most of the time.

JSF: So how, how was it to work with your co-workers? Was it, did it have a family feel or were you supposed to keep your eyes on the ball?

LM: At that time when I first started, there were only I think 16 people working in the shop, and a lot of the machines were side by side and Mr. Abraham didn't believe in people talking and working at the same time. As a matter of fact, there were two machines just outside this door here, they were soldering machines. One was for soldering the rack bars and the other one was soldering the (inaudible) and then there were two fellows working there side by side just about as close as we are here, and his office was right here. He came out that door, saw them talking, walked over to them and says no talking, you can't work and talk at the same time. Left, came down this hall, went down that isle, came across, came back up this side, and there was talking again, he'd have them punch out, go home. He's final.

JSF: My goodness.

LM: Oh yes, he was very, very strict, very strict. I tell you he don't fool around.

JSF: I guess not.

LM: No. No, very strict, I was saying very meticulous, everything had to be just so. Only things, one time we were going home. We used to home the River Road because we lived in Waltham, up the River Road down at the corner there, there used to be a police box, not a traffic light, there used to be a police box and he used to direct the traffic from his (inaudible), and he was stopped and the afternoon looking out a car window and he saw something on the side of the street, get out, picked it up, put it in his pocket, next morning came into work and would pass a (inaudible).

JSF: Oh.

LM: They hooked up at the work sheets and find out who made that part and he blasted them. He blasted the kid because it's the way it's on passed away, I want to know about it, and he laid that kind out in lavender. Another time, morning, he's had a, we had no smoking in the shop for, we had no smoking, and some of the guys would smoke and they went to the men's room and they had unscrewed the light bulbs, and sit down and have a smoke. Well, he came in one Saturday morning and he hooked up a bell to the light and ran it to his office, and I just happened to be going in to wash my hands. I was off over there on the punch press at the time and I went to the men's room and he came in charging through the door and he threw his hands up on the top of the door and he's saying to himself, are you smoking in here and it scared the daylights out of the guys, but that's, that was him. That was him. They never did know what to (inaudible).

JSF: My goodness.

LM: He was just, he was a small man, very short. I don't think he was 5 ft 2 and I don't think he weighed 98 pounds soaking wet, very tiny person. Tiny.

JSF: Wow.

LM: Dynamite, nice guy.

JSF: So did people like him or disliked him?

LM: Oh yes.

JSF: In spite of the fact that he was really strict?

LM: He was strict. He was quick, but if you made something, you've got to make it right. Several times when I get in, when I came into the assembling room and was making machines, if we found a bad part, he stopped, for dust and stuff, he didn't care. The machine parts had to be right, and it's our production. Sometimes it would be two or three days, sometimes once a week.

JSF: Well why did you stop production, was that to, to discover why it was bad?

LM: Yeah. And if it was bad, if like a screw hole may be off 2,000, so when you are putting the parts together, it was at an angle.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: It wasn't precise.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: You'd go through every piece that was made out there. See, that was part of the beauty of it at that time because you were making the parts and use them almost simultaneously, you know, so you were able to check everything. Like that chain's over here, but just optimistic, fix it and make sure it was right, if they weren't, just throw them away and start all over again.

JSF: Right. Now we found stories of his stopping production during the early years when they were still feeling, feeling out how to produce them, but I guess he always was.

LM: That was back in '62.

JSF: Yeah. Wow.

LM: The early sixties, he'd do the same thing, that's when I was in here. I don't, he didn't leave here till '62 or, I think he left at the later part of '62, yeah.

JSF: So is that when Mr. Friedman.

LM: Came in, yeah.

JSF: So was he a Perkins, was he a Howe Press employee or did he come in from outside?

LM: He came in from outside.

JSF: Ah. So did he change the atmosphere here when he came?

LM: Somewhat, somewhat yes, some was good, some was not so good. There was a conflict between him and, when David Abraham retired, his son-in-law who was the foreman of the shop then, was state, now, I was 30 (inaudible), he was a, he did all the tool and dye work and set up most of the machines, designed most of the pictures, and he built most of them, and for some reason, there was a little bit of jealousy between the two of them.

JSF: Yeah, that stands to reason.

LM: Freddy knew more than he did and so Freddy has to go. That's the way of the world you know.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: So that was a big mistake as far as I'm concerned because he had a lot of, he knows an awful lot of knowledge there.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: After that, it went pretty much the same. Friedman was very good at it.

JSF: Was he equally strict?

LM: Not as strict as the old man. Nobody was. Everybody had pride in what they did. That's changed over the years. It's different.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: But we'll see.

JSF: So what's your most, what's, in terms of the first years, what, what, is there like a story or an event that really stands out in your mind, something interesting or funny?

LM: Not off-hand, I know that something, I can't think of anything.

JSF: Well the story about the bathroom was pretty funny.

LM: Oh yeah, but it, it was definitely, that was so much the opposite of what he normally was and you very seldom saw him this way, and it sort of stick out and one, the only thing I can think of was there was a young fellow that made a small part from the blade there, and he was afraid that if he made too many bad ones that Mr. Abraham would jump all over him, so he used to put them in his apron and he tried to flush them down the toilet once and of course the old man saw them at the bottom of the toilet bowl, put them in his hand and mouth and confronted him with it. Yeah, that, that.

JSF: What a terror.

LM: Oh yeah, it was, if you were just running a punch press and you made a bad part, you stopped and he'd look at all the punch parts to see how far back it went and what caused it and why. But that was the way he was. Everything had to be right on the money.

JSF: It sounds like people were afraid of being confronted, were they afraid of being fired or is it just that they, they --

LM: No.

JSF: -- were afraid of being humiliated?

LM: No, I don't think so. Like once they got used to his ways, I mean still what he was trying to do, no because you knew he wanted, he wanted the best and that's what he expected to win, and either you complied or you got out, and most of the guys they complied because that's what they wanted also.

JSF: Sure. Sure. Fair enough.

LM: Yeah.

JSF: So well, in this era, like the early sixties, I think most of the teachers lived on campus, was that true of Howe Press employees as well?

LM: No.

JSF: So you never, you never lived on the Perkins campus?

LM: No. No, we, (laughter) our place didn't come under the same strategy. That was teachers, this is Howe Press, but it can be, and sometimes we were part of the school and sometimes we...

JSF: Yes. It's still confusing.

LM: We weren't, really part of, you know, we were I remember one time Mr. Friedman (inaudible) very happy that live-in quarters on the campus, he was (inaudible), no.

JSF: Oh.

LM: He was (inaudible), nobody could have that. And I had one fellow here, a blind fellow, he was my instructor for a good number of years, and he traveled back and forth from Revere.

JSF: Wow!

LM: Yeah, that was quite a haul. He'd take, I think he said five different transfers to get here.

JSF: Oh, that's terrible.

LM: And five going back, so they had bought, Perkins had bought a couple more houses around the neighborhood so I heard about it and I asked them if he could, you know, no, that's for a person.

JSF: Oh, oh.

LM: So you know they never had anybody here staying on campus.

JSF: So it sounds like a benefit that some people wish they could have had access to.

LM: Yeah, to be a part of the Perkins staff or (inaudible) yes, but not that much.

JSF: So is that still true, does anybody from Howe Press live on campus?

LM: Best of my knowledge, nobody from Howe Press had ever lived on campus.

JSF: Hmm.

LM: Maybe once in a while, we'll have foreign students come in for training and they'll stay in some of the houses, but not any of the Perkins staff would, to my knowledge.

JSF: OK. (laughter)

LM: Perkins state, yeah. (laughter)

JSF: Yeah, it's, it's, a separate entity and yet under the umbrella.

LM: Yeah.

JSF: So. It's...

LM: It depends on which way you want to word it.

JSF: Right. Right. So what's the most difficult or challenging aspect of working at Howe Press like over the years?

LM: Oh boy. You mean now?

JSF: Well now or way in the past.

LM: Well not right now, we don't have any.

JSF: You know, whatever, whatever comes to your mind.

LM: No, now I don't, I don't have any because I don't have to make any of the decisions any more. All I do is repair the, repair Braille now, now that somebody bought (inaudible) now so I don't, I don't ask any questions, I don't do any of that because I'm beyond that stage. So if they don't care then I don't.

JSF: Now I understand in the past, a lot of the employees at Howe Press were Perkins alums?

LM: Were what?

JSF: Were, you know, former students from Perkins?

LM: Some of them were. We had, my chief inspector was with me for, oh for a long, long time. He had 55, 55, yeah, 57 years with Perkins.

JSF: Oh my goodness.

LM: He was a student at Perkins and then he worked for Perkins when they were over in East Boston, or South Boston, and then when they bought this place, they came over here with them.

JSF: Wow.

LM: Yeah, so he was a long, that was a fellow named David (inaudible) and I think he was the longest employee Perkins ever had.

JSF: You know I've seen photographs of him.

LM: Yeah. Nice guy, funny guy, but again, it's... Now that's a story from Perkins. [Al] used to live right here on Royal Street, that big yellow house, I think, who's living there now?

JSF: Is that where Carol [O-Nutt] --

LM: Yeah.

JSF: -- O'Connor-McNutt?

LM: Yeah, yeah. Carol lives, that big house?

JSF: Yeah.

LM: Well, Al had been married and had been living there. That was their house and Mary died some years before Al, but they both worked here at Howe Press. Mary was a proofreader and Albert was my instructor. Well, after Mary died, Albert made out a will that everything he owned was to go to Perkins, his house, property, everything he had. Before he died, they had a new director come in, Chuck Woodcock. Now I don't have anything good to say about Mr. Woodcock, but he came down here one time and Albert had his own personal table, an antique table and chair that he used to sit on. He had his lunch and make his notes and everything else like that. When Mr. Woodcock came in here one time and saw the table and he says I'm going to take that table. Albert says no, that's my table. Mr. Woodcock then said no. It's on Perkins property. He took it. It's true. I was sitting right here and he tried to take one table that I had over here, and I said no, that's mine. He said it's on Perkins property. I said I don't care if it's on Perkins property. I have the bill of sale for that. But he took his table and his chair.

JSF: Oh my goodness.

LM: Albert went home and changed his will, changed his will. Perkins ended up with the house but they had to buy it from another individual.

JSF: Wow.

LM: So that...

JSF: That was an expensive table.

LM: That was an expensive table.

JSF: Wow.

LM: And that table disappeared with him back to Ohio. No, I have nothing good to say about that man, so I'd stay away from him.

JSF: OK. OK. So we used to Braille things here, we actually produced Braille books up till, was it 1978?

LM: We did, yeah. We produced Braille books, Braille maps, Braille cards, dominos, oh we did all those things. We used to have a whole (inaudible) department out there. I'll show you where it was.

JSF: OK.

LM: I'll show you where, I'll show you around the shop, but we had the slates, the stereo typists, there were two people on stereotype that would write up the books and everything else, and then they (inaudible) on presses and then in somewhere in I'd say the mid seventies, there were a lot of different Braille printers that they wanted to consolidate. I think the Catholic Guild was one, we had an outfit over here by where the [Leokley] Country club used to be and there was another outfit in Newton when I say [Ceedon] Street, and somehow they got together and they said well let's put it all in one plant, and I think they all ended up in what they call it NAB, Massachusetts.

JSF: Well, I think it's National Braille Press.

LM: National Braille Press.

JSF: And it's at St. Stephens Street.

LM: Yeah, on St. Stephens Street and I think they all went over there. One of our printers went over there with them and he stayed with them and he ran most of the presses over there. He was part of Howe Press but he wasn't. One of those deals, but he stayed with them for a long, long time; and then he got married and went to England. But that was the end of the Printing Department.

JSF: Oh is that [Grooksh]?

LM: Hmm?

JSF: Mr. [Groomsh]?

LM: No, that was, oh boy, (inaudible) [Babbot].

JSF: Oh, OK.

LM: Calling him (inaudible) [Barrett] and I can't remember the other fellow's name. He went to, (inaudible) [Barrett] went to National Braille Press and was working with Mr. Raider out there for a number of years, and I can't remember the other fellow's name. But he went out to Chicago Lighthouse and he went to work with someone out there.

JSF: So were you sorry to see the Braille operations go?

LM: Not, not really because we always did all this cost us, we always lost money with the Braille.

JSF: Oh well.

LM: Yeah so it, no it wasn't that much, that wasn't, because it wasn't lost, it was just transferred, and it was more profitable to the people that it was centralized now in one place rather than be scattered all over the place, so. I think National Braille Press made out very well with it because they're still in business now.

JSF: They sure are.

LM: Yeah, so it worked out, that part of it did.

JSF: Yeah. Well something we discovered is that all of the plates went there, and including the old Boston Wine pipe Plates, there are stuck, some still around, and they're all gone. They don't have them any more.

LM: No, they don't. Thank you. Oh, all right.

JSF: So I'm kind of sorry we lost that piece of our history but that's...

LM: Well from what I understand, those were all stolen.

JSF: Stolen!

LM: Yeah.

JSF: Before, before they went to National Braille Press? But why would somebody steal them, what value would they have?

LM: They were all zinc.

JSF: So the metal had more value then, ah.

LM: I, yeah, it would take a good, a good 20 footer, maybe a good 40 footer to load them all, but they were gone.

JSF: Wow! It was an operation then.

LM: Yeah. That whole room downstairs was full of plates. That's where they used to store them all, and I came in one morning and they were all gone.

JSF: Wow!

LM: They, from what I understand, and what I hear, they like even had the FBI on it because it was a federal offense.

JSF: Oh. What made it a federal offense?

LM: I'm not sure. It's all, I couldn't understand why the FBI, but this is just what I heard, but the fact was, somebody had an awful lot of work getting rid of them because those things are heavy.

JSF: Wow! When did this happen?

LM: Oh God, somewhere in the seventies.

JSF: Wow!

LM: Early seventies or late sixties.

JSF: Well, so it suggests that somebody knew the business.

LM: Well somebody knew the business.

JSF: Knew the building.

LM: Yeah.

JSF: So, an inside job.

LM: Yeah, yeah.

JSF: That's a shame.

LM: Oh yeah, that's true, a shame, but it was a lot of money putting in a lot of work, all those books.

JSF: Yeah.

LM: Thousands and thousands and thousands of books over there.

JSF: Wow.

LM: All these were done. I mean tons, we're talking tons of stock, could hardly ever move it.

JSF: Well, you'd have to have a lot of, a lot of hands.

LM: Yeah. Yeah.

JSF: Wow!

LM: And the only, the only entrance is right down there, so somebody had to see somebody in there.

JSF: You'd think.

LM: Probably not, nobody ever, they never found out who did it.

JSF: Well, there went Perkins history.

LM: Yeah, we got a lot of it.

JSF: Got, got melted down.

LM: Well a lot of the, a lot of the old books stayed. They just took the plates, not the books.

JSF: Yeah, so they were clearly after the value...

LM: Yeah.

JSF: The value of the zinc.

LM: Just the metal, and I think they had, I think there were some under the Lower School too because I remember, I remember moving some up there with (inaudible) [Barrett]. They had a storage room up there for some of them too and that was gone, those were gone.

JSF: Really?

LM: Yeah.

JSF: Oh that's clearly.

LM: You know they knew what was an inside job because they got this one which was the main one, then they had that one too, and we went up there afterward.

JSF: Wow.

LM: And most of them were gone out of there too. The type was still there. That surprised us. Yeah, they had oh lead type, for setting up. There were tons of that left up there and they never touched that because it was just the zinc.

JSF: So they wanted the zinc.

LM: Just the plates.

JSF: Wow.

LM: Oh, I think why the federal government came because a lot of it belonged to the Library of Congress.

JSF: There you go.

LM: That, that.

JSF: There you go.

LM: That may have been why. I couldn't think of why they came, got into it but I think that's where it came from.

JSF: I think, that's right. Perkins used to Braille books for the Library of Congress.

LM: Yeah, yeah.

JSF: So, now I don't know at what point they stopped doing that.

LM: Probably when, when they moved the Printing Department.

JSF: So, in the, in the fifties, like 152?

LM: No, that was, no, that would be back in the late sixties, early seventies.

JSF: OK, yeah, I'm thinking of the closing of the workshop in South Boston, so that was.

LM: Oh no, no, no, no, no. They did it here for a good number of years.

JSF: So where did the, where did the Print Shop get moved from?

LM: It was a big room out back now that they're setting up, that used to be the Printing Room and the Press Room. That was the Press Room. I'll show you that all too.

JSF: OK.

LM: OK. And...

JSF: So it's here in the building.

LM: Here in this building, yeah, on the same floor but in the back section. This used to be a big place. This used to be downstairs just before I came to work here. It was where... Ever went into the business office downstairs?

JSF: Not downstairs. I've been to the one where Margaret used to work in the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LM: No, no, no, not Margaret.

JSF: Never been there.

LM: Well that's the new business office, that's where we use the machine shop used to be.

JSF: Ah.

LM: We used to have, they just got finished moving the last of the machines when I came in here. That's when they built this building.

JSF: Oh this is an extension?

LM: Yeah.

JSF: Ah.

LM: Yeah. You can tell by that's, that's all, this is all cinderblock here.

JSF: Yeah, yeah. It does look different.

LM: You'll see them when we go out there, I'll show you.

JSF: OK.

LM: OK?

JSF: Yeah. OK. So just kind of, kind of to finish up, what's, what's the most rewarding aspect of, of your work with Howe Press?

LM: Satisfaction, and I mean that very sincerely. Some years ago back in, back in the seventies, we hired an assistant manager down here and he was with us for a while and he got an offer to go to work for Digital and take over as General Manager for Digital. Well he called me in the office and said I want to talk to you, and I says I hope you (inaudible). I like the way you work, he says, I know what you make. He says I have different (inaudible), I have just been hired as General Manager at Digital. He said I'd like you to come and work with me because I know what you make, I will offer you triple --

JSF: Wow.

LM: -- to start. Now to me, that was a big big fund, so I went home and I said can I let you know next week, this was on a Thursday, and I said I want to, you know, talk it over with my wife and family. I went home and I told my wife. I said he's working at I think it was at 128 and I told her. You know of course I had three young kids then, and I said it looks awful good. She says well, do you think you can adjust.

JSF: She said what?

LM: That was my decision.

JSF: Oh, OK.

LM: There used to be a cherry tree right up here at the corner of the, you know where the Gray Barber is?

JSF: Yes.

LM: OK, there used to be a big cherry tree right at the junction of the street coming down that way, and I used to eat my lunch up there. So I went up there on Monday morning and I was sitting down underneath the cherry tree eating my lunch and a teacher came by with a young boy, a young girl, I think oh probably seven or eight and the boy maybe just a little bit younger, and I said good afternoon, she said good afternoon, who are you? I told them what my name was, he said what do you do, I said I build the Braille Writers, and they both came over and hugged me.

JSF: Oh!

LM: And they said oh thank you, thank you, thank you. I went home and I told my wife, I says I can't go, I have to stay. She said well that's your decision, and it was just something, it's what I felt inside, it just, it just couldn't be placed with money, and I've been here ever since.

JSF: Well that's a great story.

LM: No, it's a true story.

JSF: Yeah, yeah.

LM: And as we, I'm still here now and I should have retired five years ago, six years ago, seven years ago.

JSF: Couldn't stay away.

LM: No. But it was just satisfaction meant more to me than money.

JSF: Well, right.

LM: That's it!

JSF: Well thank you, Mr. Murphy. I really appreciate your willingness to be part of the Oral History project and...

LM: I hope it helps.

JSF: Oh, absolutely, great, great anecdotes.

LM: But as I say I don't like to say a whole lot about the changes, that's something else that I just, the heart seems to be gone and I'd like to see it come back but I know it's not going to.

JSF: Oh, that's sad.

LM: But that's life.

JSF: I, I guess.

LM: I'll show you around the shop.

JSF: All right. Thank you.

**End - Leon Murphy**