**UMBC Course Cultural Documentation in Participation with Communities (AMST 358)**

**Interview 001**

**Wednesday, February 6th, 2013**

**Steelworkers United Union Hall Local 9477**

**Dundalk Ave., Baltimore, MD**

Interviewer: Michelle Stefano (**MS**), Maryland Traditions / UMBC

Interviewee: Joe Rosel (**JR**), (former) President Local 9477

Transcriber: Rebecca Borland, AMST 358, UMBC

[00:23] **JR**: My name is Joe Rosel; I’m the former president of Local 9477. Now I administer the hall, but I was the president of the Local at the time when the plant went down…unfortunately.

[00:33] **MS**: So, tell me what brought you to Sparrows Point; what’s your story?

[00:38] **JR**: Well, I guess my story is like a lot of other people’s story here. I went to Calvert Hall, so that was an academic school. I went there on a basketball scholarship. I played football on the state championship team. I was an honours student, so I was going to college, but I would get jobs during the summer. You know, the iconic jobs in Baltimore. I worked at National Brewery during the summer and things like that. Eventually, I got a job in the summer working down the Point, thinking that I would probably go back to school, which I did graduate from Towson while I was working there, but I never left. And I mean, I had the same legacy as other people. I’m a third-generation steel worker: my family’s been working at the plant continuously since 1918. So one of the things I did when I was trying to find a buyer to save this plant, I always kept my grandfather’s chit. This was a brass tag that you had to have in order to get paid. So he lived to be ninety-four, and I found it before the coroner got there. He died at ninety-four putting water in the bathtub. Him and I were close, you know, all his life. We used to go fishing together and things like that. He worked there for forty-six years. My great-uncle worked there for forty-six years, and my uncle, who’s eighty-one, he worked there forty-some years. So all that time… had continuous employment in my family, so I knew about the Point. And friends of my parents – my father never worked down there, he was an aid to the chief of the Baltimore City Fire Department – his friend is the one that said ‘well, he could go down there and get a job at least for the summer if that’s what he wants to do.’ And that’s what I thought I would do, just take the job for the summer. It was a labour job, because everybody starts in the labour department, but the money was actually good. The money was so good. Now, the job was tough, and it was… still racist in a sense. I started in the general labour department where we did construction work, cement work, brickwork, and we did the hottest jobs in the plant. I ran jackhammers inside the furnaces when they took the furnaces down. This, at one time, had only been an African American job, because when I came in the called the department the ‘CBs.’ I thought they meant like the Navy CBs or the military CBs that did construction, but it stood for the “Coloured Boys.” And I said, ‘well, boy that’s a racist name. Why is this called the ‘Coloured Boys?’ It had to be reversely integrated, where it only had African Americans and you had to put Caucasians in this department in the late seventies… So they said to me at the time, ‘well, it’s not as bad as what it used to be called. It used to be called the Slave Department.’ So that department was the general labour department where you got picked up in a truck and you got taken around the plant to do that hardest labour jobs there were that no labour people didn’t want to do. Running a jackhammer inside of a hot mill furnace, inside of a plate mill furnace, go in the floos of the open hearth. You would go underneath the mill where all the dirt and everything collected that would have went out the smokestacks, but over time moisture would collect and you would be down in there shovelling and wheeling out iron oxide dust. So this is where I started to get, you know, an idea of like, I guess I was a troublemaker, but really not. I mean, since I had gone to college, I knew about asbestos and things like that. We also had bricks that were silicosis, that people would get silicone dust because the bricks were silicone. Silica in those bricks because they would last longer. But I knew you couldn’t breathe any kind of dust while you were working that hard, doing bull work, day after day, so I asked for respirators. But they told me that my life wasn’t worth $300,000, the company did, because if I brought in respirators or they gave me a respirator, everybody would want one. So I brought my own in. I brought my own respirator in, knowing that other people work in other places that had to have them working in furnaces. They said I was a stubborn Dutchman for doing that. So that’s when I first got there. You had to do what you had to do. You have to fight and do these things, and I wasn’t really worried about it. They could try to do whatever they wanted to do, but I told them ‘you’re not paying me enough to kill me young. I don’t mind working in a hazardous environment, but I’m going to protect myself.’ So I worked hard, but I did protect myself, which at that time the company didn’t particularly like. So, you know, that got me kind of being involved in the union, and I got involved from an early age. There is the thing of the union sticking together, but there also is a political aspect to this. I was the youngest chairman of the Grievance Committee ever elected; I was only twenty-nine years old. We had five locals. I kind of would like, the first nine months of this labour department I’d like to write a book, because it was intense, called “The Coloured Boys: Nine Months of Labour.” If I described to you the kind of work that we did and how it was done, you’d probably be shocked at the things that people had to do and the things that people had to endure. And this was as late as 1978. But I transferred out of there into the fire department, because we had five locals and the fire department had it’s own local. My father had be aid to the chief, so I had picked up fire department kind of knowledge by osmosis through my father, just like steel knowledge through my grandfather. And even being in the plant, one of the things is I remember working with my grandfather, who a lot of people said ‘he only graduated form the sixth grade, but he was a very smart, well-read person.’ He was kind of an inventor. He would work in his garage and invent anything that he needed and things of that nature. And in the summer you would sweat, and he had a certain smell to his sweat. I came to realise working in the steel mill that that’s what it was coming from, that if you worked in the steel mill around steel that your sweat had that kind of smell from the steel. I didn’t realise it at that time, why was his sweat smell unique. But, you know, so I got involved in there in the labour department, I went into the fire department, I became a shop steward in ’82, and this is early for somebody, and a treasurer in ’82, chairman of the Grievance Committee in ’85. So… I’ve been in every major steel negotiation since ’86, because I was chairman starting in ’85, elected president from ’88 to 2000, and then elected president again when we had all five locals combined into one after 2002. Prior to that, I had been given jobs by the International, like I was the first contract coordinator they ever put in place, which was a person who worked with labour and management to try to make things better. And prior to that, I was the partnership coordinator, trying to change the way work was done in the plant. I mean, from a college standpoint, Bethlehem Steel was the first company to institute scientific management. Frederick Winslow Taylor, his first studies were started at Bethlehem Steel in 1906, where basically it said you had to have an elite class of college-educated managers tell the workers what to do. They started with a Pennsylvania Dutch man named Schmidt, and they gave him actually footsteps to take of loading and unloading pig iron on the rail cars. And by the 90s we were trying to overthrow that, and basically say that people were smart enough, and the steel… become part of knowledge economy where you didn’t want the workers to check their brains in at the time clock, but you wanted use the knowledge that people had in the plant to do jobs more efficiently. And actually, that really worked.

[08:02] **MS:** You’re very knowledgeable about the plant, particularly because you were a CB. You were in the general labour department. So tell me a bit about the mill. Did everyone know each other? Or were you just, in a way, quarantined to your department and you knew who was in your department or your mill? Was there understanding of the larger community while at work?

[08:24] **JR:** Yeah. It’s interesting. I guess the Lord works in mysterious ways. From being in the general labour department where I got picked up in a truck every day and taken to one part of the plant – and the plant’s four square miles – so they would pick me up to take me to the job, but they wouldn’t bring me back. So I had to walk back, or we would run back from two or three miles away to get back to our locker room. But I got all over the plant in that job. And then when I went into the fire department, you have to think about it. The fire department is all over the plant. We had five thousand fire extinguishers, three hundred fire hydrants, three hundred different alarm systems and things of that nature. So for me, I got to go every nook and cranny of the plant from start to finish. The average person, no. The tin mill people knew the tin mill; they had no idea what the blast furnace did. The blast furnace people knew the blast furnace, but they didn’t know what steel making did, or the hot mill, or the coal mill, or the… lines, or the rod mill, or the wire mill, or the plate mill when we had all those things. But I was able to get this perspective of the whole because I was in all those mills every day, in and out, and I had a natural intellectual curiosity to know about the mills. And, yeah, in general, the average person, if they didn’t transfer out, they only knew their mills. I mean, people on the finishing… might not know that the blast furnace makes pig iron and… They would think that the blast furnace was making steel, but it wasn’t. They would know the tin business, but they wouldn’t know the other things. It depended on what kind of job you did. And since I was in central maintenance, after first I was in labour then the fire department, I became an MTE – Maintenance Tech-Electrical. I mean, I had a bachelor’s degree, too, from Towson in the early 80s, but what I found out was I was making more money than my professors. So it was okay to have a college degree, but if I wanted to make money, I wasn’t going to make any more money with my degree than I was going to make down the plant. So that’s the thing that people needed to understand in the end about this plant, which seems weird to me. You know, the Sun paper saying, “the plant shuts down will create high-tech manufacturing jobs.” We already had high-tech manufacturing jobs. That’s what was left. We had changed it to people learning programmable logic controllers. I founded the Career Development Program in 1991, where people – we had a corporate college where people could go to school and have continuous education the whole time. I was a founding member of the Joint-Plant Safety Committee where, instead of letting the company do the safety, we had the union involved. And when we started that in 1991, if you can believe this, the all-incident injury rate was thirty. That meant three people out of ten that worked there got hurt there every year. By the time we were done, we were down to one or two. So we reduced it almost thirty times, from thirty – in other words, thirty per cent of all the people got hurt every year – to only one per cent. And the major reason for that was employee involvement and having the union work with the company to make safety better. So all those changes that we were making, ironically it feels like all the changes that we made to make things better in terms of more efficient hurt us, in the sense of it made it easier for them to shut the plant down when we only had two thousand people versus when we had ten thousand people. But we did that in order to make unit labour cost less – I mean, our labour cost were… seven or eight per cent of the total cost – so that the union labour there was highly efficient. I mean, you’re never going to get it to zero, but… going to be seven or eight per cent of the total cost because of our part of the knowledge economy and smart people who knew what they were doing was a tremendous accomplishment for us, but then it seems like that became, if there is no political will to save manufacturing, they could sacrifice two thousand jobs where they wouldn’t have sacrificed ten thousand jobs. And I’ve never understood really why… interface with the state, the county executive, all these people, I don’t think people understood. In 2008 Sparrow’s Point generated three billion dollars in revenue. The horse racing industry generates one billion dollars in revenue, and it’s a hobby for millionaires, and it creates jobs for people – nothing against any work that anybody does because you have to have dignity in all work – people mucking stalls, and grooms and things like that that are low-paying jobs that people aren’t being paid for. Yet they get a subsidy of seven per cent of all the slots money, a hundred million dollars a year. I mean, we couldn’t get ten cents… We ought to keep a plant there that’s paying people good money with benefits, that is highly technical, and does something. Understand, steel is the most important strategic mass-produced material in the world. Everywhere you look around you when you go outside, you’re going to see steel. And the United States does not produce more steel than it needs. Even now, we produce about, if you were running full out, about a hundred million tonnes and we use a hundred and twenty. When things were really good we used the hundred and forty and we produced a hundred. So there’s forty million tonnes of imports in a good year, but even in a bad year, there’s twenty million tonnes of imports. It isn’t like because Sparrow’s Point goes out all the sudden that’s going to chance the supply-demand ratio. All it means is more imports are going to come in. I think that’s really a travesty for that to happen. I mean, it seems to me we have all these organisations, people get paid. The Regional Manufacturing Institute of Maryland, you think they ever called me to say ‘what could we do to help you?’ No, never got a call. Nobody ever said anything. But he’s on the Sparrow’s Point plan for candidates to redevelop it. Did they ask anybody from the union to be on the Sparrow’s Point plan redevelopment? No. So all these kinds of things, you know, sometimes we felt like we were a one man band… All the people in Brazil, the Ukraine, the Russians, the Koreans. Using my contacts with Peter Marcus, who’s a number one consultant in the world, and Mike Locker to try to do anything we can to find a buyer, but there’s really no incentive given to a buyer to come in there. Everybody’s looking to buy the plant in Alabama. Alabama gave Thyssen Krupp, a foreign company, the Germans sixty-three billion dollar company, a billion dollars of incentives to build that plant. And that plant’s losing a hundred million dollars a month. Yet everybody’s scrambling down there to buy that to keep that open. But Sparrow’s Point, I mean, it looks like we’re not going to be there.

[14:58] **MS:** So tell me how you feel about your involvement in the union and fighting for these things.

[15:07] **JR:** Well, I don’t think it’s over for me. I mean, look I got a poster in my room with Cal Ripken and that’s one of the few times I saw my father cry, when I took him to the game where Ripken broke Gehrig’s record. It says ‘perseverance.’ So for young people, and all the people, understand the race isn’t over until you’re dead. The fight’s not over until you’re dead, so for me this isn’t over. Maybe Sparrow’s Point’s going to get down and redevelop, but I think it’ll still be redeveloped and have steel down there again. May not the way that it is, but the possibility is that one of the uses of that ground – three thousand acres or four square miles – is still, in the future, a modern steel plant. Who knows? Because the port’s not going to take up all that room, and there’s… transportation system and things that you can do, but all that can fit down there, and that may be what people want to do in the future, depending on what happens with the economy. Because as the economy cycles, steel went up and down with a good economy or a bad economy. If we ever do the things that we need to do, which is rebuild the infrastructure of the country, that should be three trillion dollars over twenty years, or a hundred and fifty billion dollars a year, that would provide the need for six Sparrow’s Points to provide steel to rebuild the roads, the bridges, the sewer systems, the water systems, the ports. That’s what everybody ought to be fighting for, because that’s the real way to sustainably, over the next twenty years, get out of this economy that we’re in. This economy’s been flipped on its head. Seventy per cent of the economy’s consumption, twenty per cent is financial, and ten per cent is manufacturing. The financial community’s, the ones that got us in this fix in the first place, they don’t create wealth. They flip papers, they create markets of things that half the time seem to us to be fraud, meaning a derivative from mortgage-backed securities that you can either sell to this person or… to that person and then say you’re doing a good job. I mean, how do I promote a stock, a derivative like mortgage-backed securities, to you and say you want to buy it and then go to the next person and say we’re… to make it be worth less and we’ll make money off of that. To us, that seems like fraud. But to make something, to make a car, to make a widget, to make steel, to make those things, those are lasting jobs and things that ripple out through the economy. For every one steel job at Sparrow’s Point, there’s five other jobs that spin off of that, from the vendors, from the community, from the restaurants, from people buying books or whatever, I mean, the people have money, from the taxes that are spent and all the rest of it. So we need to get back to manufacturing being twenty per cent of the economy, and the financial community needs to support to where they’re only ten per cent of the economy, in my opinion.

[17:52] **MS:** Thank you. Can we switch gears to a more cultural angle? What’s the importance of Sparrow’s Point to you, culturally?

[18:00] **JR:** I think Sparrow’s Point’s an iconic place; it’s a historic place. I don’t think people cared about that. We started making pig iron there in 1889 and steel in 1891. So the plant’s been there over a hundred years. It was the largest steel mill in the world in the 1950s and the 60s. We had thirty-two thousand were there working at the height of Vietnam. In World War II, with the shipyard being part of it, we were building the liberty ships, like one a day, to send out to do things, to take freight and things that we needed for the war effort. So Sparrow’s Point, to me, is an iconic, historic plant, that it seemed to me people didn’t make enough of it when it went down… What plant in this area would mean anything like this? It was the largest manufacturing plant in the state, it employed more manufacturing people than anything else, it created all this economy. It’s devastating… Baltimore County now, not to have this, and the politicians who think it’s better to redevelop that land, God help them when they run in the next three or four years because that place is just going to be an empty lot. And we can kind of look at that when you look at Broening Highway. The sold us the same bill of goods wen they tore down the UAW plant on Broening Highway. Now they gave them six hundred jobs at the… transmission plant in White Marsh, but the Broening Highway place… is a couple warehouses and a bunch of flat land. Now, this can be redeveloped and the port can come in there, but it won’t be for ten years. It’ll take five years to tear the plant down if that’s what happens. And in the meantime, you know, what do all the restaurants in that area do? What do the housing values do? What do the businesses, the hardware stores, and all the rest of it, the grocery stores do when all these people don’t have jobs anymore? It’s bad for the economy.

[19:54] **MS:** Absolutely. My question to you, though, is, for my opinion as I’m getting to know this community, there are things that endure. The importance lives on. What is it to you? What is the legacy?

[20:08] **JR:** The legacy is like what my father told me when I grew up: ‘be honest, work hard, and do the right thing.’ My grandfather was there, and my great uncle was there, and my uncle was there. The legacy of Sparrow’s Point is people who worked hard in tough jobs, and they were tough as nails, but they went to work and they did the work that needed to be done to make steel, and they made good money, but they were willing to make the sacrifices. A lot of them were veterans, we gave the veterans preference. So all these people were people that say the pledge of allegiance, salute the flag. They were the people who fought in Vietnam, a lot of Vietnam veterans and things like that. The spirit of what happened in the day was embodied by Sparrow’s Point in the people that worked there. My father, for instance, he was probably legally blind in his left eye, but he memorised the eye chart so that he could get into the army, fight in Korea, and he wind up getting the sharp shooter medal because he could see better out of his good eye than most people could see. But today, do people try to get into the military that way? I mean, he didn’t want to be 4F or classified 4F, and all the people at the Point were all like that. They were the salt of the earth. They were the Americans that were the backbone of the country, and that’s what people need to understand. That’s what they were, the hardworking backbone of the country, the middle class who made good money, that spent their money, got nice houses, got good cars, and lived a good life as a middle-class person, sending their kids on and making their life better for their children, which is what almost all those people want to do. The parents were always like, “what I want to try to do is make the life of my child better than the one that I have.”

[21:46] **MS:** So on an emotional level, how do you feel when you look back at your time at Sparrow’s Point and all that’s happened?

[21:52] **JR:** There’s all different parts. Like I said, when I first went there as a labourer, I think of that in a certain way. What I did for years in the fire department, what I did when I was the president, what we did with the partnership programme things. But, I mean, in the end I regret that I wasn’t able to save the plant and find a buyer because I don’t think this needed to happen. The blast furnace is one of the best blast furnaces in the world. The coal mill’s one of the best coal mills in the world. Nobody could tell me this plant ought to go down because it’s obsolete. It seems more like the powers that be believe that you should take capacity off the market in order to reduce the supply to help the demand and have prices go up, which I think is fool’s gold because I think just more imports will come in. I don’t regret working there. I loved working there, taking the time, being part of the legacy of my family to be there. I mean, I ran for president this time thinking that somebody was going to have to go in there and put up the biggest fight they can do to try to save this place knowing that RG Steel was a terrible company and probably not going to make that. I knew that from day one. Nobody had to tell me that. I knew that before they bought the place that if they were the ones who bought us, we were in trouble, because they were only financial people. They only had money. If you didn’t have access to raw materials, you were going to have a problem. Labour is only six or seven per cent of the cost, but if you’re buying raw materials at world market prices, especially when three companies control seventy-five per cent of all the ocean board iron ore, you’re in trouble. We needed to be bought by a strategic steel maker who controlled their own raw materials, and we’d still be open. But, having said all that, I have a sense of pride in working there. I have a sense of regret that the plant is being shut down, but the only thing I can say is I can look in the mirror in the morning and say I did everything I could, and fought as hard as I could fight to try to keep that open. And times, like in sports, one time I was at Calvert Hall, we played Dunbar, and Dunbar was the best basketball school probably in the state, sometimes they were even voted number one in the country, and I scored seventeen points against them at Dunbar. But we lost seventy-two to thirty-six. So what happened there was I shot seven for ten from the field, three for four from the foul line, and played the best game I could play, and we had no chance of winning. This would seem the same way. I could fight as hard as I could, using all the contacts I developed over all the years – and I don’t think anybody in the union had more than me – pulling out all the stops, talking to the Ukrainians, the Russians, the Brazilians, the Koreans, finding anybody I could. People on Wall Street, and we still couldn’t get it done. All you can say is you did all you could and it didn’t happen. And maybe we needed more support from the powers that be. You know, people talk a good game. There was always a saying people had in the planet, especially in the machine shop: ‘I hear what you say, but I see what you do.’ So there’s a lot of talk. There’s a lot of rhetoric. Let’s save manufacturing, and then we were having an election year prior to while this is all going on. What did all the politicians say? Jobs, jobs, jobs, we need to save jobs, and manufacturing. Well, where is it? Here’s a plant that could have been saved that wasn’t. And it would have took some incentives, it would have took some innovative things on behalf of government to do that, to incentivise a buyer to come in and re-open and say ‘look, we’re going to give you tax breaks, we’ll give you some money to do this.’ I mean, one hundred million dollar incentive, like what they’re giving the horse racing industry every year. I mean, is the Preakness more important that two thousand manufacturing jobs? I’m good with the Preakness, I’m good with the horse racing, but I don’t think it’s more important than Sparrow’s Point.

[25:47] **MS:** Well, this was a great interview. Thank you so much, really. Are there any more questions?

**Informant is asked about a Sparrow’s Point token that he had brought with him**

[27:04] **JR:** I kept this as a memento of my grandfather who worked down there forty-six years. He died when he was ninety-four years old. But, being the president local and then fighting to try to keep this plant open, I kept this as a memento saying to myself that it was a solemn oath to myself and my members that I would do everything I could to try to save this plant, keep this plant open, knowing the legacy and the history of all the things that were so important to so many people, not just me. I’m typical of a lot of people, and I wanted to remind myself every day, so I kept this with me about what I was fighting for, which is basically not a job, but a way of life. This is my grandfather’s chit that he had to keep with him in order to get paid. You would take this with you to the payroll office and have to show them this in order to get paid.