

**Winter 2014**

Volume 48, Number 4

*Citizens versus the Freeway:*

**RIP-35E and the Pleasant Avenue Route through St. Paul**

*John Watson Milton*

*Page 3*



*When the Minnesota Department of Highways published its official state highway map in 1972, it included an insert map that showed how the interstate highway system would eventually crisscross the city of St. Paul. The dashed lines to the left of center indicate that the section of I-35E running north-south along the Pleasant Avenue corridor was incomplete. Map courtesy of the Minnesota Department of Transportation.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 48, Number 4

Winter 2014

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations  
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program  
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

## A Message from the Editorial Board

History is not always harmonious. When President Dwight Eisenhower envisioned a vast system of interstate highways, designers did not plan for parkways as part of that system. But over many years and several court battles, tenacious St. Paul citizens and legislators managed to carve out an exception: 35E as it runs through downtown St. Paul. John Milton has carefully researched this chapter of Ramsey County history and uncovers its complex and relevant story in this issue. Gerald Scalze shares the story of Ralph Scalze, a strong labor leader who negotiated increased benefits on behalf of workers at the Seeger Refrigerator Company during the 1950s. On a less serious note, Linda McShannock shows us some photographs of young men outside an East Side gas station in 1941, capturing a lighthearted moment just before the United States entered World War II. We don't know the names of all the men in these pictures; contribute to history and help our editor identify them!

*Anne Cowie*  
Chair, Editorial Board

## *Fighting to Keep Seeger Running:*

# Ralph M. Scalze and His Leadership of Local No. 20459, AFL-CIO, 1949–1955

*Gerald E. Scalze*

Actually, my father's interest in collective bargaining, or labor relations started before January 7, 1949, when he was elected president and business agent for Local No. 20459 of the Refrigerator Workers' Union of the AFL-CIO. At the time, this was the largest union local at the Seeger Refrigerator Company, which was then one of St. Paul's biggest employers. My dad and I talked several times about his reasons for running. He once told me, "I just got tired of the men (all male workers, then) working two hours a day and being sent home [when the production work for the day ran out]." Also, the wages were very low prior to his election. My dad, Ralph M. Scalze, actually started as chief steward (he was a welder). Later he worked his way up to assistant business agent before deciding to seek the top job.

After his predecessor, Marvin Lewis, decided not to run again, my father decided to run. But the election wasn't "a walk in the park" because there were others who also sought that position within the local. But on that historic day, he was elected president and business agent of Local No. 20459, whose headquarters was located at the old Polish-American Hall, on Payne Avenue in St. Paul. A photo taken at the time (see back cover) shows my dad seated in the center along with Anton J. (Tony) Basch and Marvin Lewis sitting to his right. Standing behind them were James Rosenthal, Jim Harry, two unidentified men, and Scott Galloway. At a later time, Tony Basch would also run against my father, but he was defeated in that subsequent election.

Collective bargaining has had a long history in U.S. labor relations. It's the process by which working class people, through their unions, negotiate with their employer to determine their terms of employment, particularly pay rates for various types of jobs, hours of work, benefits such as health insurance, pensions, vacation, holiday, and leave policies, and safety and discipline rules. Employees who belong to a union decide by election who will speak for them in the bargaining or negotiating sessions with the represen-

tatives of the employer. Once the two negotiating parties reach a tentative agreement in the form of a labor contract, the union members vote whether to accept or reject the contract. A ratified contract between the union and its employer legally

binds both sides—workers and management—to the contract terms. Labor contracts are for a period of time, typically 36 months. Ralph Scalze, however, always opted for 37 months because this allowed an extra month for bargaining in case there was a need for emergency negotiations.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century in the United States, working class people began to organize into unions. Over time and especially during the 1930s and '40s, federal law established the procedures by which workers could establish a union local. Often union organizers representing a craft or trade, such as refrigerator workers, would help workers to secure union representation at their worksite. A union organizer



*In the early 1950s when this aerial photo of the Seeger Refrigerator Company plant on St. Paul's East Side was taken, Seeger was one of the largest employers in the city. The facility straddled Arcade Street. Photo courtesy of James B. Bell.*



*Ralph Scalze in his army fatigues in 1942. On his left shoulder is the identification insignia worn by members of the 29th Infantry Division, which was one of two divisions that landed at Omaha Beach in June 1944 at Normandy, France. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.*

informed workers of their rights as employees, identified local workers who might have the necessary leadership skills to lead the union local, explained the union organizing process, and helped employees who wanted to join a union to campaign for union recognition. Ultimately, the goal of the organizing process is for workers to build strength through their numbers in the workplace so that they are able to achieve a binding agreement with their employer that brings real improvements in their job-related working conditions.

According to Professor James B. Bell, the author of *From Arcade Street to Main Street: A History of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, 1902–1984*, “it is impossible to identify the events, years, and employee leaders who initiated the effort to organize the unions at the Seeger factory” in St. Paul.<sup>1</sup> The Seeger Company’s extensive corporate records prior to 1955 when the firm merged with appliance manufacturer Whirlpool Corporation of Benton Harbor, Mich., were destroyed following the closure of the Arcade Street plant in 1984. Consequently when Dr. Bell researched the history of the Seeger Company, he

was not able to determine with any precision, for example, how many employees were employed by Seeger and how many of them belonged to the union. In his book, he also pointed out that “detailed information regarding the labor controversies that led to strikes at the [Arcade Street] factory in 1940 and 1951 has also been lost.”<sup>2</sup> Based on the few records he was able to find, Bell concluded that by 1950 the Seeger Company, which had a second plant in Evansville, Indiana, in addition to the one in St. Paul, was “operating at full capacity” manufacturing

a line of domestic and commercial refrigeration units, freezers, and dehumidifiers at the rate of 815,000 units per year. The company employed more than 6,100 people, had over 1,600,000 square feet of factory floor space and total assets in excess of \$35,000,000 [the equivalent of \$339.15 million in 2013]. Sales of refrigeration products to Sears, Roebuck and Company, Montgomery Ward and Company, Admiral Corporation, and Frigidaire were over \$80,000,000 [\$775.2 million in 2013 dollars].<sup>3</sup>

In the estimation of Professor Bell, the decade following the end of World War II “had proved to be a period of extraordinary productivity and profitability for this company located on St. Paul’s East Side.”<sup>4</sup>

Although I was just a kid when my dad was elected business agent, I became good friends with my dad’s friends. And they (the committee) thought it was good that “Ralph’s kid” took such an interest in my father’s occupation. I was awed by my dad’s poise and confidence. At the ripe old age of 8, I already knew about Social Security and paying taxes.

As a family, we still enjoyed the outdoors, watched TV, played softball at Phalen Park, and went to wrestling matches. We also bowled quite a bit, partly because my dad was a tremendous bowler. In fact, he was on the Industrial Surplus team that won 22 league titles, one city title, and two state titles. My father played in a softball league with the Seeger men (he pitched) and later was an umpire for Little League ball in which I played. We also fished with my mom and dad at Lake Vadnais. Politically, they were staunch DFLers.

We took vacations (Lake Itasca) and my mother was pleased by Dad’s popularity wherever we went. My brother and I also did well in school. Because our family had originally come to America from Italy, we were all raised as Catholics and regularly attended the 8:00 a.m. Mass. Although we knew that my dad had an “intense” position, we were happy. “Happy.” A great word, for a great couple. They adored each other, as well as my brother and I. No abuse and no hitting. “That only makes it worse, Jer,” my father would say, and my mother agreed. Their look of disapproval was all we needed.

Ralph Michael Scalze was born in St. Paul on November 16, 1917. His parents were Rocco and Josephine Scalze, who lived at the time near Swede Hollow. He grew up on the East Side on Edgerton Street and graduated from Johnson High School. After high school, he and his twin brother, Carl, got jobs with the Twin Cities Rapid Transit Company (TCRT). TCRT had been unionized in 1934; thus Ralph received an early exposure to collective bargaining with a transit management that was struggling to make a profit in an economy that was severely depressed while at the same time it was battling the automobile for ridership.<sup>5</sup>



*The family of Ralph and Frances Scalze in 1949. Ralph holds son Gerald while older brother Robert stands in front. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.*

Drafted into the U.S. Army, Ralph Scalze entered the military at Fort Snelling in January 1944. Following basic training, he was shipped to France as an infantryman shortly after the Allied assault at Normandy in June 1944. While there, a tree fell on Private Scalze and he spent six months recovering in an army hospital in Denver. He subsequently received an honorable discharge with a service-connected disability in March 1945 and returned to St. Paul.<sup>6</sup> Not long after he came home, the Seeger Refrigerator Company hired Ralph Scalze as a helper at the Arcade Street plant. Married to Frances A. Gatto in May 1941, the Scalzes lived at 1011 Burr Street, about twelve blocks west of the Seeger factory at the corner of Arcade and Wells streets. They later moved to 2041 East California Avenue.

The Seeger family has its roots in Germany. For reasons that are unknown today, a Seeger left his homeland in the late 1840s and first settled in Kentucky. From there the family moved to New Ulm, Minnesota, in 1856 and then to St. Paul in 1868. There John A. Seeger learned the trade of cabinetmaker and carpenter. By the 1880s, John Seeger was in business for himself as a contractor and cabinetmaker and became associated with the Bohn Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, which built iceboxes for local customers. The Bohn Company had financial problems, so John Seeger partnered with another businessman in 1902 and formed the Seeger-Gallasch Company to manufacture cabinets and iceboxes. By 1908, John Seeger was in charge of the new Seeger Refrigerator Company and two of his sons, Walter G. and Gustave R. Seeger, had joined the firm, which by then was located on about fourteen acres of land on St. Paul's East Side at the southeast corner of Arcade and Wells streets.

Slowly the Seeger Company prospered and grew as a manufacturer first of iceboxes and later of electric and gas refrigerators. In 1926 the company ceased making iceboxes and concentrated on refrigerators. Two years later, Seeger began to develop and manufacture the *Coldspot* line of refrigerators for the Sears, Roebuck Company. The Sears

*Coldspot Super Six* model, which was first designed in 1935, soon became a top seller. From then on, thanks to the marketing clout of Sears, Roebuck, Seeger refrigerators were marketed all across the United States and the company's earnings climbed steadily until Japan's attack on the United States in December 1941 changed everything. Like many manufacturing companies in America, Seeger ceased making products for the domestic market and converted to making bomb racks, ammunition boxes, refrigerators for navy ships, and other equipment needed for fighting the war.

When World War II ended in August 1945, the Seeger Refrigerator Company employed more than 5,000 people and

workers. Between 1946 and the merger with Whirlpool in 1955, gross sales at Seeger totaled \$710,666,217 (more than \$6.89 billion in 2013 dollars) and the company had a net income of \$37,094,374 (\$359.4 million in 2013 dollars).<sup>7</sup>

As Professor Bell notes in his history of the Seeger Company, according to the U.S. Commerce Department, average hourly earnings in manufacturing in the nation increased from 62¢ per hour in 1937 to \$1.02 in 1945 and to \$2.07 in 1957. This rising level of average hourly wages not only documents that workers were making more per hour by the end of the 1940s, they also had additional income with which they could purchase household appliances such



*The freezer assembly line at the Seeger plant on Arcade Street in 1948. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

had begun converting its plant to manufacturing refrigerators for the domestic and commercial market. Postwar demand for home appliances of all kinds, including refrigerators, surged. In addition, Sears was pioneering the sale of home and farm freezers. As this new market steadily grew, Seeger sales also took off in this product line. Soon Sears added color (not just white) finishes to refrigerators and upright-style freezers made by Seeger

as refrigerators and freezers that were made by the Seeger Company.<sup>8</sup> Given the number of refrigerators, freezers, and other products that Seeger shipped each day from its plants, those who built these appliances could see that their employer was prospering and they wanted to make sure that they shared in this success. Ralph Scalze led the negotiating team for Local No. 20459 that made sure that the hourly wages of



In 1953 Ralph Scalze negotiated the purchase of this building on Maria Avenue as the headquarters for Local No. 20459. Today it's the home of Aerie 33 of the Eagles fraternity. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.

Seeger workers were increasing as the national economy improved.

In the early 1950s, our family was impressed by what my dad was accomplishing with Local No. 20459. In 1953, my father decided to move the union's headquarters from its long-time location on Payne Avenue to 287–289 Maria Avenue in the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood. So, with help from the local and the AFL-CIO, he purchased the two-story, brick building there for \$53,000. Constructed in 1914 as the DeLuxe Theatre, which was then owned by Charles Graham, the building had been mostly used to show movies. Today, the building is still there on the city's East Side, but now it's the St. Paul Aerie 33 of the Fraternal Order of Eagles. Did Ralph Scalze buy the building on purpose? Yes. My dad had a knack for numbers. I remember the seats coming out after the papers were signed and a machine putting down the new wooden floor. I still have the movie projector!<sup>19</sup>

On the other side (Seeger Company) when it came time to negotiate a new labor contract was John Kissinger, the general manager of the St. Paul plant. When asked about my dad at his retirement party in April 1983, John Kissinger said, "What in the hell did I get myself into?" He was referring to my dad's style in conducting negotiations. Although he always wore a dark, conservative suit and tie, philosophically speaking, my dad would wear a "black leather jacket" and carry a baseball bat when he went into bargaining sessions over a new contract. He was extremely tenacious. Why? The answer is simple. My dad took over

a "dying local," which was like buying a house and remodeling it from top to bottom. What caused Local No. 20459 to be "dying" in 1949? It wasn't the workers. It was the very poor working conditions and low hourly wages that union members had at Seeger. His desire, *passion*, and his blunt style got things done! Trust me.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to John Kissinger, Frank Taylor, Joe Sergot, and Dick O'Dea were managers at Seeger with whom my dad worked closely or negotiated with during his sixteen years as the local's business



Each time Ralph Scalze ran for reelection to the top post at Local No. 20459, he would have plenty of campaign buttons and cards made up so that he could hand them out when he talked to union members before the vote. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.

agent. As business agent, dad worked day and night as the primary liaison between Seeger's managers and members of the local.

Ralph Scalze was always in the *St. Paul Dispatch* during the years he represented the local, and frankly, it was like living with a politician. AFL-CIO Local No. 20459, was in a manner of speaking, a grass roots movement which eventually ended up with tremendous benefits for the average working person, which subsequently influenced benefit negotiations at other union plants across the country. My father also had, not to brag, a 92% popularity rating at the time. In addition to his duties as local president and business agent, he attended labor conventions in Indianapolis and later, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. He even was a delegate at some of these.

As a result of my dad's effective leadership of the local, Seeger really changed. Boy, did it ever.

First, my dad wanted people working at Seeger to have benefits like no other company. Based on Dr. Bell's research into labor-management relations at Seeger, by 1947 union workers had a contract with Seeger that included provisions that covered such matters as union security, the responsibilities of the company to its employees, grievance procedures, seniority, layoffs, discharges, disciplinary procedures, leaves for military service, maternity leaves, and equal pay for men and women performing the same job. The union contract at the time required Seeger to have written job descriptions showing what the duties were for each job classification. Job descriptions were then used to determine wage classifications. For example, the contract guaranteed a minimum wage of \$1.00 per hour (about \$10.45 in 2013) after four weeks of employment.

The contract also established the method for calculating the number of



A 1953 campaign card for Ralph Scalze. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.

days of vacation a union worker would earn in a given year based on his or her seniority and the number of hours the employee had worked in the previous year. Another provision of the contract stated that after the completion of one year of service at Seeger, union members received group life insurance coverage of \$500 (about \$5,225 in 2013) with gradual increases in the amount of coverage to a maximum of \$1,000 based on the number of years subsequently worked. The contract also called for Seeger to install certain safety devices in the plant, furnish

soap, towels, gloves, and other articles necessary for the health and safety of workers. No health insurance for employees was included in the contract, however.<sup>11</sup> Although it had nothing to do with negotiating with Seeger, another improvement that Ralph Scalze introduced in 1954 was to install electric voting machines in the union hall. The new machines greatly expedited counting ballots each time an election was held.

During his sixteen years in office as the local's business agent that began in 1949, Ralph Scalze was proud to state that he had accomplished the following on behalf of the union members he represented:

- Purchased the headquarters of Local No. 827 (the successor to Local No. 20459) on Maria Avenue in 1953. When Ralph left office in 1965, the mortgage on the property was paid off and the Local was earning enough rental income to cover the building's basic operating expenses;
- Oversaw the buildup of the Local's operating reserve to about \$55,000 (\$419,650 in 2013 dollars) in the Whirlpool Credit Union (which Ralph brought in because he wanted union members to cash their checks at the credit union and not at a bar);
- Negotiated increases in the average assembly line hourly wages from \$1.183 (\$9.03 in 2013) to \$1.334 (\$10.18 in 2013);
- Negotiated the lines accumulated waiting lines for small parts that had to be fabricated in advance of being part of a larger assembly;
- Negotiated a guarantee of 115% of hourly wages for breakdowns, waiting time, and the like;
- Won agreement from Seeger to increase paid holidays from 6 per year to 7½ per year;
- Negotiated on behalf of piece workers an increase from 100% of pay for holidays to a guaranteed 130% of pay;
- Negotiated a provision in the contract with Seeger that allows older employees to have the right to a preference in the shift they work;
- Ensured that Seeger workers were covered by one of the best health and wel-



*Solly Robins, left, the attorney for Local No. 827, and Ralph Scalze admiring the check for \$126,000 that the local received in late 1955 from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to rebuild 827's strike fund. This photo appeared in the St. Paul Dispatch and in the Minnesota Union Advocate. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.*

- fare programs in the region, including major medical coverage;
- Ensured that workers can participate in a fair pension plan which pays according to each employee's years of service;
- Made sure the labor contract with Seeger included guaranteed call-in pay;
- Negotiated a 4 hours guarantee for worker call-in pay;
- Negotiated a contract with Seeger that included a ten-minute relief or break period for each two-hour work period and a five-minute-long wash-up time at the completion of a work shift;
- Won corrections to a number of inequity adjustments;
- Made sure the contract with Seeger included a \$1,000 dollar death benefit (about \$7,630 in 2013) for pensioners;
- Negotiated death benefits for union workers;
- Won stricter seniority clauses in contracts; and
- Negotiated the inclusion of jury duty pay, National Guard service pay for call ups or summer training, and funeral pay in the contract with Seeger.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Bell's research shows that in the contract that the union negotiated with Seeger in 1950, the minimum wage

had been raised from \$1.00 to \$1.16 and in the 1952 contract the minimum was again raised, this time to \$1.33 per hour and for the *first time* it provided a pay differential (that is more pay per hour) for employees working the night shift.

Even more significantly, the 1950 contract stipulated that "Seeger was to provide the standard Blue Cross and Blue Shield hospital and surgical benefits then in effect." In addition, each union member could elect to purchase through payroll deductions medical coverage for dependents.<sup>13</sup> Although a number of these early 1950s additions and increases to the labor contracts negotiated between Ralph Scalze and the leaders of Local No. 20459 and the managers representing Seeger were not uncommon in labor negotiations in other manufacturing industries, such as automobiles, they did ensure that Seeger workers kept pace with the growing number of benefits that union workers were receiving in the leading manufacturing plants in the U.S. At the time, the Seeger executives who agreed to these additions and increases in benefits in the union contract did so, in all likelihood, because their company was benefitting from the explosion in the sales of automobiles and other durable goods, such as refrigerators and freezers, to American consumers. I even remember Dad urged Seeger to hire African Americans, which was one of the first unions in the Twin Cities area to do this.

Historian James Bell reports that the Seeger Company had become a closed shop by the end of the 1930s; that is a manufacturing plant where workers on the plant floor were required to join a union. He estimates that by 1946 about 1,800 production employees belonged to the Refrigerator Workers Union at Seeger. Other unions, such as the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the Millwrights and Machinery Erectors, the International Guards Union of America, and the International Union of Operating Engineers, had a presence at Seeger, but the number of workers who belonged to the locals for each of these unions was much less than the Refrigerator Workers.<sup>14</sup> The



During his sixteen years leading Local No. 20459 and then Local No. 827, Ralph Scalze represented his fellow members of the local at many meetings and conventions of union officers. This badge was for a meeting of the Central States Conference of Teamsters in the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.

Seeger Company would have negotiated separate contracts with each of these unions. Typically these other contracts would be modeled on the one negotiated with the Refrigerator Workers because that union represented the greatest number of employees.

Meetings of Local No. 20459 were always held on Tuesday evenings from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., once a month (excluding those periods when negotiations with the company were taking place). I loved to go to these meetings. Yes, a police officer was present in case of problems (the union hall had a bar), but my dad didn't drink. Never did. Alcohol was a very sore subject for us then.

Seems like every time (it wasn't)

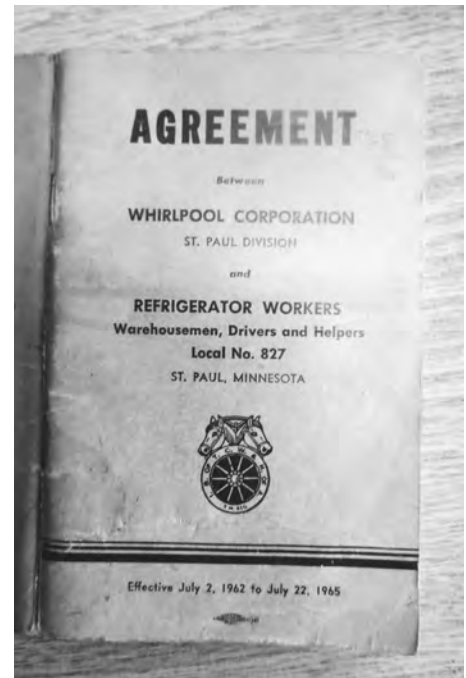
we would get comfortable at the house watching TV, the phone would ring and it would be a security guard at the plant. They would call and tell my dad that someone came to work drunk. These calls normally came between 11:00 p.m. and midnight. My mom called it "outside interference." Dad would tell security to have the offending worker report to his office in the morning, and they would talk. Most of the time my dad would have the person return to work the next day (minus a day's pay) and if it happened again, the company had my dad's permission to terminate the offender.

This method of handling disciplinary issues was provided in the union contract and allowed the local to handle certain disciplinary problems without involving a Seeger manager. Those union members who remember Ralph Scalze's leadership of Local No. 20459 not only credit him with negotiating hard with the Seeger team, they also emphasize that he continuously worked to improve the *morale* of Seeger employees through his tough negotiating positions and at the same time focused on reducing tardiness and absenteeism among workers so that he could show Seeger managers that he led a reliable and hardworking union membership.

My dad had his business cards made at a union shop, 7 Corners Printing. We (the family) only bought union-made merchandise. Once, my mom bought non-union milk and cigarettes by mistake; so my dad asked her to return them, which she did. My father detested the term "right-to-work" and he also had no respect for yes-men. I admired his "gutsy" style along with his 100% dedication to his position.

Getting back to elections, several men tried to run against my dad. They included Art Wagner, Tony Basch (previously mentioned), even my Uncle Russell Scalze. My uncle received 90 votes. On the stage, he commented, "Well, at least a Scalze" will run this local. Also, George Pavcek tried to win election as business agent. He was on the committee during these years and lost. In the election of 1965, Donald G. Heil ran against my dad. When the votes were counted, Heil claimed victory, but Dad hired an attorney

to determine whether the election had been fairly run. The investigation failed to show that Heil's election should be overturned; so Ralph conceded and left office at the end of his term in December. I think there is sufficient evidence to show election fraud, but there's nothing that I can do today to change what happened then.



Ralph Scalze was part of the negotiating team for Local No. 827 when it worked out the terms of the employment contract between the Refrigerator Workers in St. Paul and the Whirlpool Corporation for the three years beginning July 2, 1962. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.

My dad was an army veteran. He spent time in the army in France and was injured (back). He received an Honorable Discharge. Also, besides Christmas and Valentine's Day, he loved the 4th of July. In the union hall, on stage, there were two six-foot American flags, one on each corner; upstairs, there was another one behind his desk to his left, and one by the conference table. Given his service in World War II, he was proud to be the first Scalze to ever have a flag behind his desk. His wartime experiences also taught him that during those years he served as the local's president and business agent he had to be extremely tuned



in to international events as well as national and local issues.

After Seeger executives merged their company with Whirlpool Corporation in 1955, Ralph Scalze led the way in bringing the International Brotherhood of Teamsters into the former Seeger plant. He thought the Teamsters would have more clout in negotiating with the much larger corporation. Consequently he worked out arrangements so that instead of Local No. 20459 acting as the bargaining agent for the refrigerator workers at the Arcade Street facility, Local No. 827 of the Teamsters would have this responsibility.

In his history of the Seeger Company, Professor Bell wrote that the idea of the merger with Whirlpool Corporation and the electric stove and air conditioning division of the Radio Corporation of America initially came from the chairman of Sears, Roebuck in December 1954. This proposal received serious consideration among the parties because retail giants such as Sears wanted to deal primarily with manufacturers who could supply larger volumes and broader product lines in the growing market for appliances. The merger took place on September 15, 1955. From then on, executive management of the merged company was centered in Michigan at a corporation with no previous ties to St. Paul and a diminished involvement of Seeger family members who had formerly directed the Arcade Street plant.<sup>15</sup>

Even before the merger was official, Seeger employees were dissatisfied with their current wages and working conditions. In June 1955 the union members voted to go out on strike. Despite the efforts of Seeger executives and later the involvement of a federal conciliator, the strike lasted thirteen weeks. Just before the merger was official, both sides agreed to a new contract, which, as historian Bell observed, “was better than the union’s proposal.”<sup>16</sup>

The long work stoppage, however, had exhausted the local’s strike fund, but the Teamsters came to the rescue. The national organization loaned \$126,000 (about \$1.1 million in 2013) to Local No. 827 to help it get back on its feet finan-



*The Whirlpool plant on Arcade Street about 1980. City of St. Paul Planning and Economic Development photo. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.*

cially. Ralph Scalze was a key player in persuading the national to bail out the local. When the money for the loan arrived, newspapers in St. Paul carried a photo of Ralph and Solly Robins, the local’s attorney, holding up the check.<sup>17</sup>

During his sixteen years as president and business agent for the local, Ralph Scalze’s goal was to give the people at Seeger a better place to work. Consequently, he encouraged management to increase employment dramatically, even at the expense of, sometimes, his own health. When in the hospital one time for ulcers, he was still on the phone with the union.

In 1954 my father was involved in a serious car accident at Seventh Street and Payne Ave. He was coming home in his new Plymouth sedan when a truck from a local moving company hit him. His legs were bunched up by the transmission hump and he was in traction at the St. Joseph’s Hospital for quite some time. But yes, when he was awake, you got it, he was on the phone; and he adored White Castle hamburgers, so we would “smuggle” them into the hospital through a side door that my tiny fingers would fit into! It was a stitch!

Dad didn’t leave a lot of papers and other records from his time as president and business agent for the refrigerator

workers, but following his defeat in the election in 1965, he wrote to the members of Local No. 827 and thanked all the people who had helped him accomplish so much during his sixteen years as president and business agent. As Ralph Scalze put it, “I have fought and argued with other Unions in order to keep our plant running. When the employees on the line were losing time, I negotiated with the Company so that our employees would work overtime to make up the time lost.”<sup>18</sup> About this time, I vividly remember my dad once telling me, “Give the company eight hours of work, and you will receive eight hours’ pay. If you don’t receive pay, then come and see me.” That statement summed up what he lived by and what he told union members they should live by. Now I live by that standard.

He took his defeat in the 1965 election hard. There were multiple reasons why he was not returned to office. Some members wanted a new leader. Today those union members who remember Ralph’s years of service tell me that he lost the election because too many young voters wanted a leader who would take a tough stand with Whirlpool for money in the form of increased wages up front rather than for benefits. The people who voted for Don Heil were not opposed to having benefits such as medical insurance;

they just did not see the money Whirlpool spent on employee benefits in their pay stubs. Historian James Bell reports that as early as 1967, Whirlpool's senior executives began to question the wages and benefits paid to workers at the Arcade Street plant and to voice other criticisms of the cost of doing business in St. Paul.<sup>19</sup> This was an early warning that Whirlpool would be unlikely to agree to significant wage increases when bargaining over the union contract in the future.

Soon after the results of the election were public, my dad returned to his former job at the Arcade Street plant rather than take a different position with the international union at its headquarters in Washington, D.C. By returning to work at Whirlpool, he made sure he retained the health, welfare, and pension benefits he had negotiated first with the Seeger management and then with Whirlpool. His decision also preserved his union seniority. The following year, Whirlpool promoted him to the position of general foreman. At the time, many who knew Ralph thought this move was intended to forestall any interest my dad may have had in running again for president and business agent of



A photo of Frances and Ralph Scalze celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary in May 1991. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.

the local. In 1983 Ralph Scalze retired after 38 years working for Seeger and then Whirlpool. A year later Whirlpool shut down the Arcade Street plant. He died in St. Paul on January 24, 1994, at age 76. Frances Scalze died January 18, 2005.

In closing, I would like to say this. An excellent theme song for the union members to my dad would have been from the *Golden Girls*, "Thank you for being a friend. . . . You're a pal and a confidant." And he probably would have gone with the theme song from *Off Their Rockers*, "We're not going to take it anymore." My father was my hero. Actually, still is (in memory) along with my mother who was by his side always. Are you listening, Dad? You led the way!

*Until recently, Gerald E. Scalze was a life-long resident of Ramsey County who, like his dad, proudly graduated from Johnson High School (Class of 1965). He is also a former union member who worked at the Whirlpool (Seeger) plant on Arcade Street before it was closed in 1984. He thanks his family and friends who assisted him in the research and writing of this article, particularly all the former Whirlpool employees with whom he talked who knew Ralph Scalze.*

## Endnotes

1. James B. Bell, *From Arcade Street to Main Street: A History of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, 1902–1984* (St. Paul: Ramsey County Historical Society, 2007), 150.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 166–67.
4. *Ibid.*, 167.
5. For background on labor-management relations at TCRT, see John W. Diers and Aaron Isaacs, *Twin Cities by Trolley: The Streetcar Era in Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 111–15, 174–75.
6. Much of this information comes from Ralph Scalze's U.S. War Department Adjutant General's Office Form 53, Enlisted Record and Report of Separation–Honorable Discharge, May 5, 1945, which is in the author's possession.
7. Bell, 167.
8. *Ibid.*, 166.
9. Letter from Sara Nelson, Interim City

Planning Aide, Heritage Planning Commission, City of St. Paul to Gerald Scalze, October 30, 2009, in regard to 287 Maria Avenue, in which she provides details of the history of the building on this site that are derived from the City of St. Paul Building Permits Collection, Research Center, Ramsey County Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

10. Briefly summarized, Local No. 20459 of the Refrigerator Workers' Union was formed in 1936 after an election that was conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (better known as the Wagner Act), established the NLRB with the power to determine appropriate collective bargaining units subject to elections it supervised at the request of workers. Local No. 20459 was directly affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and was not assigned to any national union federation, such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. In 1955, Local No. 20459 became affiliated with the Teamsters. Usually the president and busi-

ness agent of the local, along with other elected union members, would serve as delegates to the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly. In the late 1930s, Local No. 20459 was composed entirely of employees at the Seeger plant and represented more than 98% of the workers at the Seeger facility. See the *Minnesota Union Advocate*, July 22, 1937 and February 22, 1951.

11. Bell, 150.
12. This list is based on an undated memorandum written by Ralph M. Scalze in 1965, which is in the author's possession.
13. Bell, 151.
14. *Ibid.*, 150.
15. *Ibid.*, 169–80.
16. *Ibid.*, 194.
17. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 1, 1955.
18. Undated memorandum written by Ralph M. Scalze in 1965, which is in the author's possession.
19. Bell, 192–202.

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*On January 7, 1949, members of Local No. 20459 of the Refrigerators Workers Union elected Ralph M. Scalze, front row, center, their president and secretary-treasurer (business agent). For more on Ralph Scalze and his leadership of the Refrigerator Workers at the Seeger Company plant in St. Paul, see page 18. Photo courtesy of Gerald E. Scalze.*