

The local and its fellow Building Trades unions in the city again secured wage increases with a new contract on May 7, 1949, after walking off their jobs for four days. The plumbers had asked for a 25-cents-per-hour raise to a new \$2.50 scale and received a compromised \$2.37-1/2.

With abundant work in its jurisdiction and a favorable wage, the local's membership surpassed 200 before the end of the decade.

MOVING FORWARD, STAYING BUSY

Local 33 ballooned to 218 journeyman and apprentice members at one point in late 1950, before which the local had asked for an increase in wages to \$2.62-1/2 but again settled on a middle ground with the master plumbers at \$2.50 per hour in May. When that contract expired the following May 1, 1951, the local and its employers agreed on a new pact for \$2.61-1/4 per hour and again signed for \$2.90 per hour in 1952.

The Building Trades and Local 33 truly tested their collective mettle the next year when they went on a 16-week strike beginning May 4, 1953, to win pension benefits and raises, the plumbers seeking an increase to \$3 per hour plus a 7-1/2-cent Welfare Fund provision. As a result, **Local 33 became the first local in the nation with a multi-employer, defined-benefit pension plan**, which started in 1954.

The local's **Pension Board** held its first

Local 33's primary trade classifications were amended by the United Association in 1951 from "Plumber, Gas Fitter and Steam Fitter" to "Plumber and Steamfitter," and again in 1956 to "Plumber and Pipe Fitter."

meeting in February 1954 in Judkins Hall and consisted of Local 33 members Frank Lynch, Melvern Robinson, Tom Ferguson and John Chamberlain and contractors W. C. Robinson, Don Stroh, M. A. Wolin and Carl Muench. The board, with \$34,000 on hand, voted to pay Haight, David and Haight Consulting Actuaries of Omaha \$1,948 for setting up the Pension Fund and to place \$20,000 in a savings account in the bank. *(Some 20 years later in 1973, there were about \$1.8 million in assets in the Pension Trust, including over \$611,000 in mortgage loans.)*

Soon after on May 2, 1954, Local 33 signed a new contract for a 10-cent-per-hour raise. That year, many of the local's members were at work building **Veterans Memorial Auditorium** in downtown Des Moines, which when it opened on February 1, 1955, was one of the largest exhibit halls and arenas in the country. *(Nearly 50 years later, the facility would be completely renovated as part of construction of the massive Iowa Events Center project beginning in 2002 and was renamed "Community Choice Credit Union Convention Center" in 2011.)*

While working on many major projects at that time, such as the \$3.5 million **North High School**, the \$2 million telephone company building and the \$1 million apartment complex at 3660 Grand Avenue, Local 33 briefly stopped working in May 1956 in another dispute over wages. The local's members returned to work on May 7 after settling on a contract with the Mechanical Trades Association, representing 20 heating and plumbing contractors, for a 5-cent hourly boost to \$3.25 and a flat 12-1/2-cent hourly payment into the local's Vacation Fund.

Despite the multiple wage and benefits disputes, the local and its contractors did continue to work together in most instances during the 1950s. In particular, Local 33 and the Mechanical Trades Association in early 1956 urged the City of Des Moines to enact an ordinance requiring inspection of low-pressure and hot-water-heating systems.

Meanwhile, Local 33 members were also working on construction of a new **Iowa Power and Light Company building** at Walnut and 9th streets in Des Moines in 1957 and 1958.

Before the end of the decade, however, Local 33 was again forced to strike along with the Building Trades for better wages, tying up nearly \$25 million worth of projects beginning May 1, 1959. The last Building Trades local to sign a contract, Local 33 remained out until June 2, when they were given a 39-cent total increase to its \$3.68-1/2-per-hour rate for the coming two years, including 12-1/2 cents into the local's Pension Fund.

HOLDING GROUND AMID CONTROVERSY

The 1960s was generally a period of strong employment and good times for Local 33, especially as downtown development and redevelopment of Des Moines progressed vigorously with new and renovated retail and commercial buildings. An initial membership count of over 371 journeymen and apprentices in September 1960 would surpass 500 by the end of the decade.

United Association Local 315 of Marshalltown, Iowa, was merged into Local 33 on May 1, 1960.

The relative calm was raucously shattered in March 1963 when Local 33 clashed head-on with International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (I.B.E.W.) Local 499 of Des Moines over work at the Iowa Power and Light Company's **Pleasant Hill Power Plant**. The

United Association Local 310 of Ames, Iowa, was merged into Local 33 on April 28, 1954. Local 310's city had been under the jurisdiction of Local 33 until late 1922, when the plumbers in Ames applied for a charter with the U.A. and were originally organized as Local 696. (Local 33, "owing to the distance from that city and the difficulty involved in controlling the industry, ... readily gave its consent to the founding of the new local," U.A. General Organizer Richard P. Walsh reported in the December 1922 U.A. *Journal*.)

Local 33 brothers Bill Seymour, Ted Storm, Henry Merkel and Paul Delapp man an information booth at Veterans Memorial Auditorium (now Community Choice Credit Union Convention Center) in Des Moines on Labor Day 1960.





Local 33 members (left to right) Bill Hanawalt, Tom Ferguson and Dave Sullivan at work, circa 1963.

United Association Local 47 of Ottumwa, Iowa, was merged into Local 33 on May 1, 1969.

contract from the 25 contractors represented by the Mechanical Trades Association of Des Moines on June 3, 1963, three days after its former agreement had expired. The pact called for 53-1/2 cents in total increases over the coming three years, raising total compensation for journeymen from \$4.56-1/2 to \$5.10 per hour in 1965, including health, welfare, pension and apprentice-education benefits.

Three years later, the local voted to strike against the 25 members of the Mechanical Contractors Association after that contract expired and the local's initial wage request was denied. A three-year agreement was reached a week later with the help of two Federal mediators that gave the local's journeymen \$5 per hour, including 34 cents in benefits, for the first year retroactive to June 1; \$5.35 for the second year; and \$5.70 for the third year from June 1, 1968, to May 31, 1969.

Local 33 was embroiled in another controversy during the mid-1960s over a lack of black workers in the plumbers local and other Building Trades locals. The Des Moines Chapter of the

N.A.A.C.P. had filed complaints that the plumbers were "among several that have excluded Negroes from their ranks in this area," the *Register* reported on May 18, 1966 – but when Local 33 Business Agent Wilton M. Seymour was asked in the June 1, 1967, *Register* if blacks were being excluded from Local 33, he replied, "Absolutely not."

Seek Young Negroes to Apply For Apprenticeships in D.M.

Headline in the *Des Moines Register*, May 18, 1966.

In response to the allegations, Local 33, which still had no black members by May 1967, had already started an "intensive recruiting drive" that targeted young blacks interested in applying for union-plumber apprenticeships, the *Register* reported in the May 18, 1966, article. To the local's credit, a U.S. Labor Department investigation revealed in July 1966 that Iowa State Employment Service officials were partly to blame for "secrecy that kept youths from applying for apprenticeships in Plumbers Union Local 33," the *Register* reported on July 15.

dispute became so heated, in fact, that on March 20, Governor Harold Hughes ordered a National Guard unit from Knoxville be put on alert for possible duty at the plant "because of fear there might be some violence" after officials became concerned over "a large gathering of cars in the Pleasant Hills area," the *Register* reported the next day.

The two unions were quarreling over which should perform certain work, primarily changing boiler piping, on a \$12.5 million addition project at the plant. While members

of Local 33 working for Power Services, Inc., of Minneapolis were doing the work, 800 maintenance employees of the plant who were members of the I.B.E.W. struck the facility in protest for three days beginning March 19.

Eventually, the National Labor Relations Board (which entered the case when Iowa Power charged that Local 499 was engaged in an illegal jurisdictional strike) ruled on September 28 that the members of the I.B.E.W. should perform the contested work. However, Local 33 had completed the job, which involved rerouting and temporary removal of existing pipe for installation of a new, high-pressure boiler adjacent to the plant that had been in service since early July.

Meanwhile, with upwards of 375 members covering 22 counties, Local 33 accepted a new

United Association Local 584 of Ft. Dodge, Iowa, was merged into Local 33 on January 1, 1967. Local 33 Brother John Sneddon had helped organize the local in 1912, when 14 men in the city signed a charter application with the U.A. on September 11.

Plumbers License of Local 33 member Wilton Seymour, 1967.

