



March 20, 1921, *Des Moines Register*

Earlier that year, the local also endured a week-long lockout beginning March 14, during which only 18 member plumbers were at work while the **Des Moines Retail Plumbers** demanded the union take a \$3-per-day reduction in wages. An agreement was finally reached on March 22 that slashed daily wages \$2 down to \$8 per day.

As the depression continued, on May 1 the following year the local accepted a new, one-year contract without a wage increase, holding at \$1 per hour for an eight-hour day.

A light at the end of the dark tunnel began to

shine with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, which began putting U.A. members back to work in the early 1930s helping to build schools, libraries, public buildings and housing projects under the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration. In Des Moines, the Federal stimulus funding provided many new improvement projects, including bridges, the Argonne Armory, Des Moines River retaining walls and the extension of several streets.

By mid-1936, all of the city's unions had reported growth over the previous three years, according to the July 5, 1936, *Register*. Over 65 union plumbers were at work in the city, the newspaper reported, and all Building Trades union members were "at work most of the time."

By that June, the local's membership had slowly increased to 105 ... and by June 1940, after the Great Depression had given way to **World War II**, Local 33 stood at 148 member journeymen and apprentices.

### PITCHING IN AND GROWING

With the depression a moment in history, 1939 was a record year for plumbing in Des Moines. According to the January 7, 1940, *Register*, the city's plumbing inspectors issued 2,123 permits, and there were 48 licensed master plumbers and 142 journeymen plumbers – most of whom belonged to Local 33 – in the city.

What's more, by 1941, during which the country entered the Second World War on December 7, the City of Des Moines had grown to a population of 160,000 and its economy had stabilized as commerce and industry were converting to support the war effort. Perhaps most notably, the new, small-arms-munitions **ordnance plant in Ankeny**, Iowa, was built in 1941 with over 120 union plumbers – and would employ thousands of men and women during the war years.

Local 33 also helped convert old **Fort Des Moines** military induction center into a training base for the newly formed Women's Army Corps (WAC) beginning in 1942. (Congress passed a bill on May 14, 1942, forming the WAC to fill thousands of non-combat roles in the military; soon after, the military selected Fort Des Moines as the location at which to train the initial 60,000 volunteers, according to "Images of America: Fort Des Moines.") The installation grew so quickly, in fact, with 112 buildings springing up in less than five months and a total of 174 structures built there, that the "WACs" named the area "**Boomtown**," the book recounted, although much of it was demolished following the war.

During the war, the local's membership grew to over 175, with those in the union in 1943 making \$1.50 an hour. On June 15 of that year after a one-day cessation of work, the local agreed with its contractors that its wage-increase request for \$1.75 an hour should be

presented to the War Labor Board for arbitration.

After the end of the war and at the onset of a post-war building boom during the late 1940s that would last well into the 1950s, however, the union plumbers were not so amenable after nearly two decades of constant wage concessions. In late 1945, Local 33 went on strike for several weeks before winning an increase from \$1.62-1/2 per hour to \$1.75, the former rate having been established by the Federal Board of Adjustment (the continuation of the wartime War Labor Board, which was abolished when the war ended).

The local was again on strike in July 1946 for a new contract with a wage of \$2.08 an hour, stopping work on apartments at Fort Des Moines that would house the families of 203 war veterans to "enforce their demands," the July 25 *Register* reported. The debate was not settled until after a full day of negotiations in the office of a Federal conciliator on August 3, when the local was awarded a base pay of \$2 an hour, plus an additional 8 cents per hour into a **Vacation Fund** for the local's members and double time for all overtime (an increase from time-and-a-half).

The local signed on for a similar agreement with the Des Moines Master Plumbers for the following year, which was effective April 1, 1947. During the life of that particular contract, **John Deere** took over the closed ordnance plant – with Local 33 working on its conversion for the tractor company – and completed its first year of operations in 1948 while employing over 1,400 people.



Guy H. "Cuzzy" Brooks, shown here in 1947, the year he passed away, was one of Local 33's earliest members and held practically every office in the local before retiring.

Local 33 members working for Iowa Power & Light Company, circa 1925.





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

**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'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



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.