

# Continental Group Project

by **Kimberly Springer, Curator for Oral History**

Spanning seventy years of the **Continental Can Company**, oral histories with 226 employees illustrate the type of research and practice the Oral History Research Office (OHRO) conducted for many of its own formative years. Major companies would contract with the OHRO to conduct interviews about its history and operations. In that sense, if according to U.S. legal doctrine, “corporations are people,” it makes sense to consider corporations as the subject of an oral history interview and ask narrators to comment on the corporation.

The [Continental Group oral history project](#) covers a range of industrial and technical changes with World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II as the historical backdrop. These selections from the collection were selected because they illustrate, in many ways, dynamics we take for granted today.

In this clip, **Vido Matich**, who worked in Continental’s Los Angeles factory, discusses a workplace injury, the company’s care for him, and the loyalty this engendered in employees. After a 1946 production accident in which Mr. Matich lost several fingers and was compensated \$4000 (about \$57,000 today), he continued to try to be the best on the job, but notes how interpersonal dynamics could interfere with being a loyal “company man.”

[\[Oral history interview with Vido Matich 1974; Audio Clip\]](#)

Transcript:

*Vido Matich*

*...but I say one thing...as a company... Continental Can Company it was very good for me.*

*Interviewer*

*Did the company pay your medical expenses?*

*Vido Matich*

*That time when I got hurt, it did. It did pay off.*

*Interviewer*

*So all of your hospital bills were paid by the company and did you get any kind of disability?*

*Vido Matich*

*Yeah, he gave me that man 4000 dollars*

*Interviewer*

*\$4,000?*

*Vido Matich*

*I never you know never ever no court or nothing and not just...*

*Interviewer*

*The company just gave you a settlement?*

*Vido Matich*

*I never asked for nothing. No, not no, just give it to me. I take it you know? I never was one of those. One of those guys that have seen a lawyer or something I never do that.*

*Interviewer*

*Yeah. Do you ever have any have you ever had any regrets that you didn't consult a lawyer?*

*Vido Matich*

*No, no, I think that I think that company nobody knows. I mean I really think that... company is good but we have a few people down there that would cut your throat you know I mean, you know I mean*

*Interviewer*

*In any in any company*

*Vido Matich*

*Yeah, you can you can...*

*Interviewer*

*Do you mean people there today?*

*Vido Matich*

*Well that time I don't now how it goes down there but ... he used that that people don't like you because you're working hard. They don't like you because you try produce. They don't like you because you better know him. You don't like you because you know...*

*Interviewer*

*Do you mean other workers in the plant?*

*Vido Matich*

*Even... even a foreman even different kinds of former, if see that you're making better better for that foreman he don't like it, you know what I mean?*

*Interviewer*

*Well don't they expect you to do a good job? Don't they want you to do a good job?*

*Vido Matich*

*Yeah, but they do...show you is show you, you know, your foreman they do want you to get that. But the other department he don't want you because the other department they want you to to be lower? Not him. You know what I mean? Not his department.*

*Interviewer*

*Right, so in other words, when you went from around to several departments, when you left one foreman, he didn't like you anymore because he felt you were not loyal?*

*Vido Matich*

*No, he like me because he know that I go do the job. He know that. You know, everywhere I went, I do the 100%...I was the driver the electric truck. I was the shipping department.*

**Martin Haupt**, an immigrant from Germany, became head machine adjuster for American Paper Goods Company in Kensington, Connecticut and, later, assistant foreman in Continental Can

Company plant in Three Rivers, Michigan. In this excerpt, he talks about workplace organizing in almost idyllic terms: little opposition from the company, the way that unionization made life easier for management in terms of negotiating benefits with one group, and how community connections fostered worker solidarity without labor-management relations reaching a crisis point.

[\[Oral history interview with Martin L. Haupt 1974; Audio Clip\]](#)

*Transcript:*

*Interviewer*

*The workers have any benefits in those days any pensions or compensation?*

*Martin Haupt*

*We did in in APG, we did*

*Interviewer*

*Life insurance?*

*Martin Haupt*

*Life insurance. Yeah, we paid some of what I think, see I'm not sure. We had life insurance.*

*Interviewer*

*Medical insurance?*

*Martin Haupt*

*Yeah. As a matter of fact, this is unheard of: people used to get a week's vacation with pay after a year...APG.*

*Interviewer*

*So that APG really did treat its workers.*

*Martin Haupt*

*Yeah, they could do it because you have a group of machines to take care of and the fella goes on vacation next week? Well, if things were really tough, we would bring in a man for a few hours, hold one over in a in a for the morning shift and bring another one in for the third shift to take cover part of the second. Otherwise, we will just take on more responsibility.*

*Interviewer*

*When did the company finally become unionized?*

*Martin Haupt*

*I think that was after the war.*

*Interviewer*

*By that time where relations between the employers and the workers changing?*

*Martin Haupt*

*There was still good. Yeah, I think it was after the War I'm not sure. When when we got unionized they had a vote on it. I couldn't I don't remember the year whether it became the Paper Workers' Union, A-F-of-L. And that's it didn't make much difference in clients other than we, they had their offices and their meetings. And I was part of the Union myself, because I mean, at that time,*

*and but there was no Walter Reuther rough stuff. You know what I mean, they used to call it. We never had anything like that. Some of the things they straighten out and they were better after the union came in. For one thing, it was better for some of the foremen and for the simple reason that he didn't have to deal with everybody individually on increases in pay and other practices of the company that was all on plantwide.*

*Interviewer*

*So it was really easier?*

*Martin Haupt*

*Yeah, yeah, for the foreman was easier.*

*Interviewer*

*And the workers morale was still good?*

*Martin Haupt*

*Yeah, there was no problem before. It was just one of these things. Everybody had to be organized. You know what I mean? So we got to be organized, too.*

*Interviewer*

*But actually, it didn't make that much difference?*

*Martin Haupt*

*No, it didn't improve anything for anybody might have? But I would have known*

*Interviewer*

*You didn't get any more benefit or any better...*

*Martin Haupt*

*I can't think of any that are...*

*Interviewer*

*Or better wages?*

*Martin Haupt*

*No, there would be more regular than they would be negotiated for by a committee you know.*

*Interviewer*

*But things are never so bad that you ever thought of going on strike?*

*Martin Haupt*

*There was never any need for let me put it that way. And there were a lot of people that went along because they talk about it on the way home from church, they talk about it at their bingo games. And they said well we got to have a union, too, see everybody's having a union in Britain all the metal industry that was all unionized they see splitting their time we do it down here. But there was no crisis.*

**Howard B. Chadwick** tells the interviewer how the war effort and coffee revolutionized “small unit packaging.” Before this moment, packaging was focused on large sizes for the defense industry, but supplying the military with instant coffee changed the packaging game. A renewed energy and spending power amongst post-World War II Americans spurred demand for

packaging for new products related to consumer products such as instant coffee makers and even the rise of the pet industry.

Columbia University students, staff, and faculty can browse and listen to full interviews from the Continental Group oral history project through the [Digital Library Collections \(DLC\) portal](#).