

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Orval Griggs

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

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Location: Edmonton

I lived in Edmonton all my life, except for one 6 month period in the fall of 1926. My dad took a job out at Stony Plain and it only last till Xmas and then he was out of work. We came back to Edmonton in the spring of '27. Outside of that, I've lived my entire life in the city.

Of course there was quite a bit of publicity in the newspapers. Because they wanted to do it properly. They wanted to have a parade to the legislative building and make their complaints known about unemployment to the provincial government. They were told they'd have to have a permit. So they went to the city for the permit, and the city refused to give them one. So they had a meeting and they decided that they were going to do the parade anyway. They were told if they did they would be stopped. So the fateful day came. I wouldn't want to exaggerate, but I would say there was over 1,000 men in the old market square. They gave a couple of speeches there, got them wound up. There was a lot of people came up to see this. I was one of them. I had my bicycle. That was Rice St., 101 A Avenue I think. All of a sudden 8 mounted policemen mounted up and filed right across 101st Avenue just north of the McLeod Building there. We stood about 50 to 100 feet behind. I would say there was a couple of hundred of people at least all there to watch. We watched them form up the parade. There was maybe 6 or 8 wide. They came out into the south side and turned where the old post office used to be. They were very orderly and marched. The police just stood there. Then when they were just about to the street, the officer said charge. The 8 then charged across the street parallel, right into them. Some were knocked down, many of them ran away, and there was a couple that

tried to pull a policeman off his horse. He got a truncheon over his head and knocked out, they had to carry them off. It broke up and some of them got past the police and came our way. We weren't expecting that. Then the police reversed and came right at us. My bicycle was crossways to the crowd. Of course they all turned to run, and I was fortunate to be able to get my bike around the right way. Once I got on that, I was gone. At 16 years of age, that was a very traumatic event. I saw people getting slugged by police. Anyway, it broke it all up, I don't know where everybody went. But the parade didn't go on.

I often wondered how labour and communism got separated. Because you had a building called the Labour Building. It was right across south of Woodward's. We were told one day that there was going to be a free picnic for kids at Whitemud Park. So me and a friend of mine went up there. Sure enough, they had trucks there and everything. They took us all the way over to Whitemud. They had games and peanut hunts and hotdogs and campfires and so on. It was really nice. Then when they took us back, they took us right in and herded us into this hall. We got into the hall and sat down. They started calling us comrade. I looked at this other kid, you know what I think we're into? I think these are communists. They got up there and started spieling away about the benefits of communism. We got up and walked out. I always wondered, is the labour movement in on that? That's about all I can tell you about the parade. It'll be with me to the day I die. I had seen lots of funny things, but I had never seen anything like that. When I was a boy, a very young boy, my uncle was in the first great war. He used to come to the house and would tell graphic details about what it was like in the army over in France. How you stuck a man after he was down, in the chest. Then you had to turn the bayonet a certain way to get it out. Another time there was one down in the mud. He was saying comrade, and they put their foot in his face, shoved him under the mud. I was about 7 years old then. That was the war, as far as I was concerned. But I'd never seen anything for myself until I saw that parade. I'll never forget it.

I worked for the provincial government for 40 years. I was a member of the Civil Service Association.

My father was in the Sheet Metal Workers Union. He was in it 1929 when the stock market fell. He was not only a sheet metal worker, he was probably at the top of it. He used to make the patterns that other people made the materials from. He knew all about air conditioning, heating, everything there was to know. But as things got tough in the '30s, Barry hired a couple of people that weren't on the union. Scab labour. They didn't pay too much about it. But he got to where he would send dad, there were 2 others there who were first class mechanics. They'd go out on the jobs, measure them up, get the material all ready. Then when they went to go in, Barry would send the scab labour out to put the thing back. When the union found out about that, they pulled my dad. Dad was out of work. Shouldn't have been. If he'd of kept working, he'd have a good job. Things went on like that, and finally he had to apply for relief. The union paid him \$10 a week for about a year, then the union went broke. They couldn't get any support from the union in the States, so they just went broke. So dad was unemployed. He got \$10 a month for a room and \$13 a month for groceries. One week in a month he'd be called by the city and he'd have to go out and work a 52-hr week -- 48 through the week and 4 in the morning on Saturday. Mostly hauling cinders. The city burned coal in the powerhouse, and always had more cinders than they knew what to do with. So anybody that wanted them, they'd deliver a load for a driveway or fill something. They were also cutting a lot of trails for hiking. They put cinders along them. He did all that work.

That's why it kind of bugs me about this welfare today. When anybody suggests they work for a living, oh no you can't do that. They should have lived in the dirty '30s. I had to have my tonsils out when I was about 17. So I went into the Royal Alec and had my tonsils out. Dad signed it over, because the city had to pay for it. The next month he got called back after 2 weeks. He had to work an extra week to pay for that bill for the Royal Alec. They didn't believe in those days that you come up for a handout. You didn't get money either, you got a voucher. The rent went to the landlord and the voucher had to be taken to a store. It wasn't really money. When I went to school, going to commercial school, they gave me 10 streetcar tickets. One to go in the morning, one to come back at night from Monday to Friday. Used to ride the streetcar from where we lived, up 97th Ave. and over the High Level Bridge to Scona Commercial. I got a business education

out of it. The final exam for \$5, the city paid for those. I couldn't get a job for 3 years. I was a qualified court stenographer. Couldn't get a job, couldn't get any job. Tried all over the city. So my dad was back working in a shop by this time, a little one over on 97th Street. He got the boss to hire me for \$5 a week as a helper cleaning up the shop, painting old furnaces, etc. He got a contract with Rialto Theatre and I did the work for about 2 weeks at night, starting at 9 o'clock till about 6 in the morning, holding bolts and things. Then I heard about a job with Edmonton Paint and Glass. I went down there and managed to get that job working in the paint shop selling paint cans, for \$45 a month. I had to drink a pint of milk every day to combat the lead poisoning. For some people it worked, for some people it didn't. For me it didn't. I worked there for 2 months. I'd had an application in several places, and I got a call from the provincial government. They saw my credentials and hired me for \$2 a day. I worked for \$2 a day for a year, and then they put me on the permanent staff and I got \$50 a month. But they took off union dues. So I ended up getting less money the second year than I did the first. But I stuck with the government and kept my nose to the grindstone, showed I could do a good job, maybe better than the last guy. I went to a counter clerk and bookkeeper for highways. From there I went to the highway traffic board as a registration clerk on trucks. Worked my way up there through chief clerk, assistant secretary, secretary, assistant chairman. For 11 years I ran the motor vehicle branch, ya. In 1954 the government put the cars and truck back together. Fired the guys who were in charge, because it was a mess. Our system was rated the best in Canada for the trucks. So we went in and put our system in for all the motor vehicles. Ran that for 11 years till '65. Then I went back to the board as secretary. Then from there to the chairman's job. The last 3 years of my employment I was chairman of the board.

But I've lived 3 places. First in Norwood. Then my dad bought a house on 84th St. north of Jasper. We lived there for a while. Then he sold that and bought 2 little houses opposite Ross School, Ross Flats. Lived there for a while. Then he took on a rooming house at the south end of the Low Level Bridge, called the Gray Rooms. We had a kitchen and living room and bedroom upstairs. My brother and I slept in the kitchen. We were there for about 5 or 6 years. Dad moved out to Stony, came back in the spring. We

rented a little house in behind where we had lived before, right near the riverbank. We were there for a little bit, then we moved down to 93rd St. in Cloverdale, called it Galliger Flats then. Bennet at school for my Grade 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. Then I took my grade 9 in King Edward High. Didn't like it there. Went over to Scona Commercial. Put 5 years in there. So I've got around. In those days, the city was a population of about 80,000 people. The north end was 118th Ave and the south end was 76th Ave, west 142nd St. It ran pretty well east to 52, because Beverly was out there and the 2 sort of ran together. You could go anywhere on a bicycle, and I was everywhere. I lived on a bicycle in my teens. I'm 85 years old now.

When I got married in '37 we rented a 2-room apartment up on the top of the hill 111th St. We were only there for about 6 or 8 months, then we bought a little shack down in Rossdale on 105th St. just north of the Walterdale Bridge. I fixed it up, lived there for 5 or 6 years. Then we sold it and I bought the Christchurch Manse and bought an empty lot up on 105th St. and 6th Ave from the city. Harry Marx moved it on there, and I did everything on it. Built the forms, put in the foundation. I didn't pour the concrete. I built the porches and everything, built a suite in the basement. Kept it for 2 or 3 years. Sold it. Bought a house out on 124th St 23rd Ave. That was brand new and the basement was unfinished. Did a lot of work there. Put up a garage. Sold that in 1961 and moved to Crestwood, where I have a 3 bedroom bungalow now. We've been there now for over 40 years. I have a daughter that lives out in the northeast part of the city, what's that shopping centre out there? That big one? . . . They're a mile or 2 northeast of that. Her husband, she put him through university and he got into the city's land development. From there he got on with Wimpy Western. Then he went into business for himself. He's one of the few people that can go out to a raw piece of land, look it over, and tell them how much base they gotta give for streets and avenues. Where to run the streets to avoid the low areas, and how many lots they'll get out of it. There are not many people with that expertise, so he's kept pretty busy. When somebody decides to build some houses, they look around and take a down deposit on the property, then they holler for Bill to come out. He tells them how many lots they can get. Then they sit down at the table and they're not going to get their money back for 4 to 5 years. So if they figure they can make money on it, then they buy the property. So he's doing pretty good. Our son that's not doing so

good, 2nd marriage, he's in Calgary now. But he's doing alright now, dispatcher for a trucking company. He had 2 children, my daughter had 2 children. And now her son also has a boy and a girl, so I'm a great grandfather as well as grandfather. Their daughter is getting married next week. I guess that'll start something.

Very rough. We had a butcher shop about a half block down the street from us. He had a big box there.

He had a box there that, when he cleaned all the meat off of things, he'd throw the bones in there. You could go in there and help yourself. So dad would go in there and get a big soup bone and put it on the burner. Then he'd go down the lane. If he saw somebody with a garden, he'd go up the back and say, mind if I could have a couple of potatoes or carrots? They'd say sure, c'mon out. Give him that and maybe an onion. He always bought white beans and he'd keep them in a pot overnight till they swelled. He'd throw them in with all this other stuff. There was always a big pot of stew on the back of the stove. I'd come home and skim the fat off it. Come home at noon, he'd be out. Skim the fat off it and put some in a pot and heat it up. Have it with a piece of bread. That was my lunch. My dad and mother were 11 years difference in their ages. She was only 16 and he was 27. Married, and they came west. Settled in a homestead out near Hastings Lake, which was about the worst piece of land in Alberta. Him and all my relatives. My grandfather, an uncle and an aunt all settled there. They all lost it to taxes. Dad sold his for \$700. He moved in and took on a job as sheet metal worker. His first job was with Ross Brothers in the building that you now see in Ft. Edmonton. He worked there about 1917. My sister and brother were both born out at the log shack, but I was born in the city. That was partly how we ate. You were able to buy a little bit of stuff, of course. The main things – sugar and flour, that type of thing. And I was fortunate in that I had several mothers. I had mothers all over the city. I had an aunt that lived at 105th St. north of Jasper. She was on a widow's pension. Her husband died in the first great war. I could go there any time, play with the kids. When it was meal time, there was always an extra plate out for me. I knew some people named Stewarts on 97th St. I could go in there any time. She'd say Orval, have you eaten? Oh some I guess. Well sit down here. She'd make me a sandwich. The people we met out at Stony Plain, they moved into the city. They had

a house out in Norwood. I could go there, eat there, sleep there any time I wanted. My mother had opened a confectionary store on 95th St. 103 A Ave. Of course if I went there I'd get something to eat. I didn't starve to death.

I needed some clothes. The clothes I was wearing were pretty well worn out, and it was getting near winter. I was going to Scona Commercial, which were all high class kids. So when dad went up to get his welfare, or relief as he called it, he asked about it. So they gave him a requisition. I took the requisition up to a place, it was the old fire hall on 96th St. just off Jasper there. The first fire hall in Edmonton, I think. I went in there and they sent me upstairs. They looked me all over, my clothes and all the rest of it. They gave me a requisition for a turtleneck sweater, a work shirt, a pair of GWG pants, and a pair of boots that came up to here and laced with buckles at the top, and a cap with ear muffs, and a scarf. I took that over to the Quepel Block. You know where the Quepel Block was? We're practically sitting it – where the City Hall was. It was a 3 story brick building. That was where the unemployed went that looked for jobs, just sit around there all day hoping they could get a job of some kind. They rationed me out all these clothes. That's what I wore. One day I was up at my mother's and she said, you need an overcoat. It's getting cold. She says, there's one in the paper I want you to go and get. It was over on the south side. So I went over there and knocked on the back door, and a kid came to the door. He said, Orval, what are you doing here? One of the kids in my class. I said, you got a coat for sale, \$5. You wanna buy it? I said, well I wanna look at it. It was a big long coat that had a collar about that long, would cover my head and everything. I gave him the \$5 and I wore that coat. Everybody in my class knew that was a second hand coat.

But it's good for you. The dirty '30s was the best thing for me, for 2 reasons. It kept me insecure. No matter how secure I got, I felt insecure. The second thing was, I made up my mind if I ever got a job, I was going to do everything I could to make it the best damn employee they ever had. And I did.

The biggest job I had was when I took over the licensing of motor vehicles branch. I have never seen such a mess in all my life. They had license plates missing, money was missing. They had about 10 desks down with girls and baskets on the corner, and I could see \$10 bills and \$5 bills stuck in with a paper clip on an application. People would go away for coffee, go away for lunch. I shook my head. The guy that had been in charge, he says you think you're gonna fix this place up? You're taking on a king size headache. He says, see those 3 boxes? That's missing money for the last year. You gotta clean them up before you do anything. I said, leave it to me. He says, you just think you can do anything. I said, yes I do. So he left. I called the auditors in and told them, see those 3 boxes? Do you want a good system next year or not? If you want a good system, seal those boxes up, write them missing, shortage as funds, and file them away. Okay. Take them all over, mark them 1954 applications. The first thing I did was set up a room that was locked. There were senior girls in there. Nobody was allowed in there except me and the deputy registrar. Those girls would get all the mail that came in, they would open the envelopes, take out the money, mark on the paper whether it was cheque or cash, how much money. At 3 o'clock they'd close off. Those would all go to the head cashier in that room, and she would put a ringup sheet in and ring up the money, take it out, put it in her till. And when that went out into the general office, it just had a ringup sheet with the cash register amount on it. We worked on a daily basis. We had folders of different colours. I told the staff, starting on October the first. I says, when you get a folder, it doesn't matter what work you're working on, you stop, process everything in that folder, and take it on to the next person. We put October 1st mail through on October 2nd. Certificates mailed, licenses mailed. At first they thought I was nuts, but as the time went by, they enjoyed looking for those?? Cuz they were new. Then when they had extra time they worked on the junk they had kicking around. In 1955 I had one license plate missing out of 550,000 plates. And that one I had the money for, I just couldn't find out who got it, that's all.

I worked for the government till the end of 1976. My pension was paid up, that's 1971. But they asked me to stay on. That's how I got the chairman of the board. I could have

retired. I was going to retire. They gave me that. Well that nearly doubled my pension. You get your pension based on the 3 highest years of your pension.

I don't like it. You get more efficiency, because they're working on a profit basis. They gotta make a profit on everything. But there's 2 ways to make a profit. One is to set your prices right. The other thing is to cut expenses down. Either way you make money. When you start cutting expenses down, laying off staff, you start to lose efficiency. With the government, their weakness was they weren't on a profit basis. If somebody had too much work to do, they hired another Mary Jane and bought another desk. They did that. I was sort of a privatized person. So when I took over the motor vehicle branch at 131 employees, 5 years later I had that down to 116. But we had increased our registrations by 20%.

There were more people, but there were less cars. So it wasn't hard to get around. I went everywhere on my bicycle, I had no trouble. There weren't very many street lights then. I could go pretty well where I wanted. Never had an accident. What I liked about the downtown area is you could go window shopping. People used to come downtown and walk down the streets. The windows all had displays of their wares in there. Especially at Xmas time. They'd have toy trains going around all the window. People used to stand in the street and look at that. That was a profession, window dressers was a profession. It's sad that we lost that. I think the only way they can get it going again is to have people living downtown. Otherwise it'll stay sterile, don't matter what they do. I'm not gonna come down here and pay \$3 to park my car, when I can go to West Edmonton Mall and park it for nothing. I can get everything I want there. That's the general attitude. To revitalize the city centre they have to have people living here. I think they're waking up to that fact now.

Dad did get on with the union again as soon as he started working. Dad was a dollar to a penny type of guy. He was quicker going through things than anybody I ever saw. A wonderful worker, and he'd help people. But he wasn't a good businessman. They steadily lost one thing after another after another. Then my mother and dad separated in

1927. I lived with my father, hand to mouth from one room to another. He got into his 80s, he lived in the Flat Iron Block. It was a dump, I can tell you. He used to drop in and pick up his laundry, and my wife would get home and wash it for him and bring it back, things like that. I don't know how he lived. I think he spent most of his time at the pool hall playing snooker. He was a good snooker player. But one day, just after New Years, he phoned me. I could hardly make out what he was saying. He said, Orval, there's something wrong with me. I said, I'll be right down. Went down, took one look at him, all the right side of his face had fallen. I said dad, you've had a stroke. Who's your doctor. Dr. Weinloss. So I phoned over there and had a heck of a time getting hold of the doctor. They wouldn't let me talk to him. I says, it's either that or a lawsuit. So they got him on the phone. I says, you saw William Griggs a couple days ago and told him all he needed was more rest and 2 aspirins. I says, he's had a stroke. He says, what makes you think he's had a stroke? So I told him. Take him right to Misericordia Hospital. So I did. In 1970, on January 17th, he passed away. But he knew all about air conditioning. One of the funniest stories I ever heard is that the architects built the Birk Building, supposed to be the best building in the city. They built it all and rented it out to dentists and doctors. Everybody was cold. No matter how much heat they put on, everybody was cold. So they got hold of Barry and he sent dad down. My dad looked around and said, well you've got heat coming into these rooms, but you haven't got any cold air going out. How do you expect to put heat in if you don't take some cold out? Too late now, the building's finished, you'd have to tear it all apart. So he went out in the hall and looked at the ceiling. Then he went back in and looked out. He says, your ceilings are about 2 feet lower in the hall than out here. How do you get up there? So he got a ladder and went up. There was a 2 ft space about 6 ft wide up there. He says, I can fix your place without taking any plaster off. So he put cold airs in, ran them down over the hall, and cut vents into the side of the wall. Put a fan on the roof to pull the air out. Everybody was toasty warm. He knew his air conditioning, that boy.

That's about all I can tell you about labour, that I can think of.