

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Ivor Dent

Interviewer:

Dates:

Location:

Index: Education, teaching – Running as a CCFer – Checkerboard system and the oil industry – Alberta CCF – Medicare – Adolph Litke, Ed Nelson – The Alberta Politics Today – Public perception of the CCF – Millwoods – Influence of upbringing

In the beginning, I was born and raised in Prince Albert. My father was a grocer there and he was an alderman of the city. One of the things he did, he started the state hospital and medical aid, to help the politicians get Medicare on the road. I think he was fairly successful.

He was an alderman there for many years, most of the time I was growing up.

Yes they did, as a matter of fact. He was instrumental in getting the Prince Albert City Council to allow the people with the talent, that had been running their own businesses or something, to put in their relief time in the office work for the hospital aid. This delighted the guys that otherwise would be out digging ditches, because they could use their talents to build something. And they did.

I went to school all the way through till grade 11. I was in the air force, and finished grade 12 when I got home.

I went to the University of Saskatchewan. Didn't really distinguish myself, but I did alright.

I was working the angles. What was great was that I had a university degree from Saskatchewan at the time. I learned that I could come to Edmonton and go to university,

and that instead of taking 2 years to get the next degree, I could do it in one up here. So I came and did that. I did, yes.

I taught at too many places to name. One of the things I liked about teaching was that I was able to teach from grade 4 students all the way up to graduate students at university. That gave me a tremendous thrill, to be able to work in education through that range of ages.

Well not really. I came from a political family. My father and mother worked diligently in politics, and therefore I learned from him what you should do. What you should do is to be interested in politics. For the reason that people should be involved in governing themselves.

I can't remember which was first. But I ran as a CCFer at the federal level and at the provincial level, and as an independent at the municipal level. I can't remember which I won. Oh I know what I won. It was as an alderman at the city.

I think it was 17. It was something like 17.

You're very kind.

No, we didn't. We ran at large. It wasn't easy to start out even there, for someone with the beliefs I had.

In many ways they were the same as today. There was transportation and the lack of bridges. Just as many there as there are now today.

That's true. The city grew very quickly after I was elected, and it wasn't long before the wards?? system was put in.

Yes. I went to the University of Oregon. They had a program that involved public life, and people who served in public life. I entered into that area and got a doctor's degree doing that.

Oh I can't remember how many it was. But I did run for mayor. And I did run for mayor because my predecessor had just bowed out of the scene. He was going to move ultimately to the federal scene. He convinced me that I should run to fill the vacancy he was causing. I might just add that he was a devoted Conservative, however he felt that I could do justice to the job as mayor.

He was mayor before me and he was mayor after me.

One of the things I learned in that job is that you can't satisfy everyone. I found myself working 7 days a week and too many hours each of those days. So it was a very busy time in my life. However, there were certain satisfactions in it, in that you did get an opportunity to make some pretty big decisions. Or I shouldn't say make, but be involved in making. Really important decisions. And I enjoyed it.

We had what we called the commission board. It was 3 or 4 commissioners, each one handling a different area of the administration. The only person who was not a commissioner was the mayor, who was a commissioner just by the fact that he was elected and was on the commission board.

One of the foolish moves they made. But I really believe that in fact a city council is better off if it has a group of dedicated and knowledgeable people. Knowledgeable in various fields. That's the way the commission board was made up, so that various fields were represented.

I don't know how much I did to raise the family. My wife would debate that. We had 3 sons and one daughter. Certainly that was something that even to this day we're delighted with, the fact that we have those offspring still helping us, instead of us helping them.

She was quite talented in organization. She did a great deal to make it possible for me to be successful in various ways, in the municipal field at least. We never did get to the place where there was any success to speak of in the provincial or the federal field.

Yes we were. Roy unfortunately didn't live to see the days of the limited success we've had federally, and the greater success that we've had provincially.

There's no question, he had the welfare of the province at heart. He was determined that some of the ideas he had were going to remain after him. Even though he lived for many years, many of those years we had that checkerboard development. So that the oil industry was disbursed to the point where people profited from it all over the province.

The checkerboard system was a method of disbursing the oil industry throughout the province. You say checkerboard because certain of the sections or quarter sections, every other quarter section, was good for production of oil, if you could find it. The others were not. In this manner, Elmer Roper saw into the future and realized that it was necessary, if we were going to have the oil industry disbursed where many people could profit by it, then if they lived on the right quarter section they could profit if oil was found on their property.

Yes he did. He brought his talents to the city, and worked as diligently as mayor as he had ever worked in the legislature and through the years in his public life. He was active in many organizations, and his talents were used in many places.

In the early years, the Social Credit had set up the election machinery in such a manner that we had a preferential ballot. People voted 1, 2, 3, 4 or more. When the person was elected, at one level the extra votes he got could be spilled over to other candidates in other constituencies.

Yes, that's how we got 2 elected.

Yes, it was discontinued. It took away something from democracy that we had had early on in the history of the province. It was too bad that that happened, but it did.

We did, yes.

It was quite negative. However, there were among us, the people that were active in the CCF, those who saw that we really had to make a fundamental change if we were going to experience anything like success in the years to come.

Well I can't remember that role they played across the whole country.

I must say that Alberta started to run a really substantial group of candidates. Even though we didn't elect a member from Alberta, we did gain the respect of the citizens of Alberta because of the level of candidates that found their way clear to get out and run.

The Alberta CCF was represented by me at the time it was formed. I brought with myself the feelings that I had held within the CCF, and that is that we needed some kind of new party if we were going to be successful at all.

I didn't really win on the new party banner. I was on the banner, but I didn't win the election.

I think it helped me ultimately get an aldermanic seat. I ran provincially as well. Running in all 3 levels did help me to eventually win an election. More than one election, right.

It was really good that we were seen as being substantial people with good ideas. We didn't win a great percentage of the populace, but we did win the respect of the populace. Not very well. I can remember that Medicare was one of the major issues. We had a party nationally that we definitely in tune with Medicare and with hospitalization. Tommy Douglas was the speaker within the country on this change. If they had not been there and supporting the Liberals on the basis that they put in Medicare, then we would never have had Medicare in this country.

Very definitely it had to be built from scratch. If it hadn't been for dedicated people like myself and others that were doing this work in the boondocks and in the cities, then we would never have had the success that we ultimately did have.

It was really something to see the way the people in the NDP put their shoulders to the wheel and did the work to make this province a better place to live. And this city a better place to live.

I really must believe it came about because there were people who were in the city who many of them were not active, not working in politics, but who were assimilated by the activity and the thinking that was done by the then-leaders. Who therefore put their shoulder to the wheel and we finally made a great breakthrough in this city in this province.

I think it does. I think it's here and it will continue here. The people in Edmonton do think their way through to logical conclusion, as far as politics are concerned. And they make a good job of that thinking.

Yes, Grant was super-dedicated. And it's most unfortunate that he died as tragically as he did. Had he lived, there's no question. I believe we would have carried on to the place where eventually we would've had an NDP government in Alberta. The tragedy wasn't just the loss of Grant Notley. The tragedy was that in fact we didn't have the thinking people throughout the province doing what was necessary to put an excellent Alberta government on the scene.

Ya, I have one. Grant and I went up to wherever Adolph Litke lived, I forget quite where it was. But it was north of Edmonton. We were to speak at a meeting in a hall. So we went to the hall. The only other person there besides Grant and I was Adolph Litke. So as we drove home I said to Grand, you know Grant, we could've held that meeting in a phone booth if we had wished to. But fortunately Adolph kind of saved our spirits. Just because he was so devoted that it was impossible to forget him. Therefore I remember

that meeting or non-meeting, and I remember my own comment to Grant. The two of us laughed uproariously.

I think of that. However, I belonged to the downtown legion in Edmonton. Many of those people got out and worked diligently when I was running for alderman.

I was in Oregon working on my doctorate.

Yes, I was there.

Terrific. I wish we could get as good an attendance today as we got in that day. Ed Nelson was a tower of strength in the party. Yes, he was. President of the Farmers Union and active not only in the NDP and the Farmers Movement, but in many other humanitarian movements that existed in the day.

That was the problem. That our votes came from all over the province. The unfortunate thing was that they weren't concentrated in fewer places.

I was surprised when I came to Alberta. The people living next door to us said to me and Eileen, we believe in your party, but we don't want to be active and we don't want to be identified. That was really one of the weaknesses, was that people found themselves on the defensive if they said, we are members of the NDP. It was really not too encouraging.

It was used to our detriment, and used by people who classed themselves as devout Christians. I don't really believe that a devout Christian should work to start the movement toward real democracy.

I think this is true. I think the government of the day that we're talking about back then is very much the same as the government today. I find that if you say something that is in any manner negative toward some of the stupid things that are being done by the government today, and they are many, then you are classified as being some kind of a

rogue. However, I think the rogues are over in the legislature at the moment, and they are doing some very stupid things.

...we believe that if we start to get into the situation where we start giving away what we have, and we have some significant things that are publicly owned. Like for instance Epcor. And we did have the telephone system. We start giving these away, then we have a terrible loss that we're going to suffer. Because the price of living here goes up and up because of the fact that we have given away too much power to the elected people, without having controlling boards. In this manner, we are being terribly stupid.

If we had to depend on just ourselves here in Alberta, there's no doubt that there would be no such thing as Medicare in this province. It just could not last. They drove many of the doctors out of the country, and other healthcare workers, nurses. They drove them down to the US instead of keeping them here and having our Medicare system profit from their being here. We lost them and we are still losing them. If Mr. Klein and his gang continue the way they're going, then this loss will destroy the Medicare of Alberta.

There's no question that we're overdoing that. It's no question that the government is such that it looks to the corporations for its leadership. Getting your leadership from the Fraser Institute certainly isn't going to do Albertans any good. It certainly won't do other Canadians any good.

Well I think much of the deformed party's views has been picked up by the Conservatives of Alberta. I think therefore they are getting deformed themselves. Anyone that says they can support no other has a tendency to fail to think. That, in a democracy, is a tragedy.

That's right. If we had to depend on this government for Medicare, then there are hundreds of things that they would stop doing, if we could depend on them. And we would have real Medicare here. But the process is going on. They're still forcing people out of this country and out of this province so that they can earn a decent living elsewhere. That is tragic for Albertans.

I think what we have to continue to do is to work diligently to increase our numbers. And that we have to get the people who think as we do, and there are thousands or millions in Canada who think as we do, to recognize that indeed if we're going to do something for this country and for this province, then we have to convince those people to begin to get politically active and to begin to work in one party instead of having the tweedle dee tweedle dum sort of syndrome that Tommy Douglas spoke of. Where we elected the Conservatives and that was tweedle dee. Then we elected the Liberals and that was tweedle dum. And I don't know which one was the dumbest.

Don't ask that question, because it's been a mystery to me for too many years for me to get the solution straight.

I think he's doing...I think people get into the place where they are doing good jobs. I think he is. I think many people feel that if they concentrate in a particular area, then they can convince more people than they could convince if they took the whole family of goods that the NDP has. It may be true. However, it's really disappointing to people like you and me. Because we want to see society enhanced by these people, their ideas. And we want to see them enhanced by the others like they are, that are working diligently in a very narrow area.

I think he did. I think he learned a lesson. That forming a political party on a narrow base just does not work. The NDP have to remember that. That we should not be forming a party that is so narrowly based that we can get success in just a very narrow base party. It won't work. We have to take a community of goods and say, this community of goods is what we will stand for. I see nothing wrong with individuals fighting for individual goods while they are recognizing that there are other important goods that are equal to the ones that they are promoting.

I believe that we are going to be successful in the NDP. I think success is going to come from realizing that we stand for most of the good things that various organizations stand for. We have to spend our time, our energy, and our talents making certain that individuals who do great things should broaden their horizons, so that great things can be

done generally for the populace. I think of just recently, where the senior citizens had a formidable rise in the cost of them being looked after in our society. I think of 100 other things that need doing and that a decent society, a Christian society, would do. But we can't do everything without the support of those who fight the good fight in too narrow a field.

I remember going to a house. I was out canvassing. The lady came to the door. I said I was running as a CCF candidate. She was not impolite. But what she did was just slowly closed the door and walked away from it. That was what we were up against. We were facing the fact that we would have the individuals hurling the term Communist every day and in every way. Just so that people understand that the world hasn't changed that much. I still have it. I still have people say that to me today. Even though I am a democratic socialist and believe devoutly in democracy, they do not forget that I have at one time been a CCFer. And I'm proud of it. There are not too many others who say that with the same pride as I do. But when I became a New Democrat, I feel that we have outlived that sort of stupidity from our enemies and certainly from our friends.

I think my basic support came from the fact that, in other respects, I had and my wife had won the respect of people like us. I think in those communities I spoke about earlier there were sufficient people that did begin and end up respecting the thoughts we had, and the realization that we thought progressively in all of the areas possible. You did, I did. We have others that did as well.

I think that's true. By the fact that I ran at 3 levels of government, it gave me a name recognition that most people running against me at that time didn't have. So I think it gave me an advantage. I was active in many movements, like the community leagues. I was active in the veterans' organizations. I was active in a multitude of places, and so was my wife. Because of that, we were seen as public spirited and reasonable people. Being reasonable does help, particularly when you have a little name recognition.

There are 2. The first one was Millwoods. It was impossible almost for people to build a home in the city of Edmonton or near it. Because the cost of land was being set by

developers. I didn't do this alone. The Social Credit government helped this to come about. What happened is that I went to them and said, what we need is a tract of land that is large enough that we can develop it. And develop it so that the members of the public can afford to build a house to live in this city. So we worked diligently. As I say, there were a couple of the cabinet ministers that worked with me. We got that tract of land to the southeast of the city. It helped us to put new homes into this city. It did something else. It controlled the cost of the other land that was for sale in the other areas and directions from the city.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing that I take pride in is the Commonwealth Games. One of the reasons I went after the Commonwealth Games is that I was always interested in recreation and getting people active and feeling that that was important to us all. Secondly, when I got convinced that we should go for an international games, it was the people that I respected that were working in the sports field and in the activity field that convinced me that we should put our shoulder to the wheel and bring some games here. So we did. I'm delighted with the facilities that we got from having had those games in the city of Edmonton.

I think I kept on because I'm crazier than a bedbug. In these times I might not have been crazier than a bedbug. The one thing is certainly I was abnormal. Something drove me and drove my wife to, to work for the betterment of society as we saw it. We saw that there were many people who worked for the betterment of society. Unfortunately, they chose narrow fields. We had always chosen broad fields. So therefore I did it, and I'm sure Neil did it, because we were raised to do things that are done by good Christian people. We couldn't help ourselves.

Oh there's no question that's so. There's no question that my upbringing was, I was brought up by a politician. By a mother who did all sorts of social service things. But the politician side was to hear my father say, you can't do anything if you can't get allies. So therefore the things I wanted to do, it was possible to do. Because he taught me that it was possible to get the allies. Even though he was not much different from me, he was

able to get allies in Prince Albert where we then lived. He was on city council. He always did things that were for the good of human beings.

No question it did. When I was young I went and rode the rods, way before most people did. That was a sobering thing. There's no question that I met people there who had been terrifically successful people. They got wiped out by the depression. They were successful farmers, they were successful businessmen, they were successful artisans. That left an indelible impression in my mind, that people didn't have to live like that.

I try not to call them stupid. Because that doesn't gain you influence or doesn't get you any friends. However, what I say to young people and old is, if you are a citizen of this city, of this province, of this country, then you must do some thinking. The thinking should lead you to the feeling that doing good for your friends, for your children, . . .  
[tape ends]