

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Sam Lee

Interviewer:

Dates:

Location:

Index: Construction work in the 1950's – Becoming a pipe-fitter – The plumbing industry in 1950's Edmonton – The social stigma of being a construction worker – Safety in the workplace – Deaths in the workplace – Social responsibilities of unions – Manning, Lougheed, and the unions – Alberta labour law reform – Union pension plans and their economic impact – Union health plans, bursaries – Reflections on the past fifty years – Getting labour more politically involved – Running for the NDP – Labour Music – People's attitudes towards unions in the 1950's – Looking at photographs

Sam: I'm a member of the pipe-fitters and plumbers union and I'm a steel fitter, a pipe fitter welder by trade – now retired.

Interviewer: Well we'd like to know a little bit about you I understand you come from Manitoba.

Sam: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...and, tell us how you and why you got to Edmonton

Sam: Okay.

Interviewer: What you did here.

Sam: Okay. Well, I came out of the army pretty early and I come out of it early. You know after a little over two years and I had nothing I didn't know nothing. I had left school, basically went to grade 10 but I never went, so grade 9 was my education and I

had no training or nothing. And the government upheld its promise to make sure I had my way of life. They said 'you weren't working when you got in the army, and you're not working again, goodbye' – and that's it. So I went out and started working strong back weak mind and I fell into the plumbing trade by accident. I was working as a carpenter's helper and the plumber hurt his back. Eight houses and he said I need a young lad who can carry bathtubs upstairs. And so start carrying. So that's what I started doing and I said 'I like that better than hitting my thumb on a hammer, I don't think I'll be a carpenter. So, I stayed there and then worked with him for a bit and then I went down to the union and I got a permit because you couldn't join. They had a closed union. And when somebody died or left you got in.

Interviewer: This is in Manitoba?

Sam: This is in Winnipeg, yes. So you worked part of a permit system so I got a permit, then I got another permit and so on and I stayed with that system for about three years, and progressed and then they and then where I stood in the trade and then I was moving to Churchill, Manitoba that army navy airforce base and and they were closing that down and we were going to Kitamat, my buddy and I. Never did got to Kitamat, got as far as...

Interviewer: (unclear) ...work in that aluminum plant?

Sam: Yeah

Interviewer: Okay.

Sam: And I came here from odd chance and got to work out of Braun & Root(sp??). And then the work was just here. You traveled you know. Went to Regina, Moosejaw for that thing and back into B.C. and but you didn't travel that much. And mostly the work was here.

Interviewer: So you started working here at Seven Ease?

Sam: Yuh.

Interviewer: Construction.

Sam: Yuh.

Interviewer: When Braun & Root was there?

Sam: Right. Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me, tell us a bit about the construction work in those days. Is it much different than it is today?

Sam: Oh considerably, considerably much different. There wasn't that widespread a knowledge of construction. And particularly engineering. Particularly engineering. It was it was quite common for the engineers not to understand the actual hands-on work and to leave that up to the tradesmen. So you had a rapport with the engineers you worked together more or less. The unions were growing here. For instance the millwrights' union got started here with the carpenters after I got here. And the iron workers local the only other local in Calgary it started here after I got here. A lot of people were trained on the job by the older tradesmen.

Interviewer: Like an apprentice. Were you indentured at all?

Sam: No. No the apprenticeship board did not recognize industrial workers as trade. And except for the electricians, no one else was indentured. Plumbers were, but they didn't use plumbers on construction, they used what they called a pipefitter.

Interviewer: Yeah. And so that's where you got started and how did you then become recognized as a pipefitter?

Sam: Well I eventually put in enough time the experience on the job site and then wrote a test. For in the pipefitters' hall and then I was evolved to write the steamfitters' exam by the apprenticeship board and I wrote that so I had both those exams that are steam and the pipe-fitting.

Interviewer: You sort of learned on the job. Weren't necessarily supervised and when you were thoroughly ready you wrote these exams.

Sam: Yah, it was up to me individually. If you really wanted to learn. I worked with fellas that didn't care and ten years later had no recognition but for example I went down to Crane Limited and I got all their catalogues (laughs), and I read the catalogues so I'd understand the the valves and the fittings and how their pipe was made, formed. You tried to learn yourself. Because the ticket was a passport, your journeyman's ticket was your passport.

Interviewer: Well I know some people who were considered as carpenters for example, during that period of time. But never had there carpenter's ticket. They were hired as a carpenter and the union got places in regular journeyman carpenter but they never really went through the indentured program like you did they –

Sam: Well, the carpenter in the industrial field was basically hired as a rough carpenter. And it was not that much finishing work. And if they had any they hired an indentured carpenter, a finished carpenter.

Interviewer: Scaffolds, that kind of thing?

Sam: Scaffolds, forms, yeah walls and buildings too. But the inside finishing worker the hanging doors and stuff like that which is...(?)

Interviewer: But you see I suppose all these changes took place as a result of oil being discovered in the province. Before that you had construction in nice routine jobs, but then the economy took after a well was found.

Sam: Construction before that was domestic and commercial. I remember reading an account from the archives of some negotiating that was done just prior to the war. And the pipefitter, or these plumbers, plumbers couldn't reach an agreement that they'd really want to go on strike and Mr. Crystal(sp?) of the hotel ownership owned a hotel around the bottom of the hill. In around fifth street and where the low level bridge would be, somewhere in around there. And he invited both sides of this down to his hotel and he supplied half a keg of beer and they sat on the veranda and they talked and he said 'you're not going home. We can't have a strike of the plumbing industry in this city. We're just starting to build a little'. And he stayed with them and they reached an agreement. It was all local it was all local enterprise and local contractors local people were more inclined and more involved. When the industrial work came in the local people felt a detachment. As an example, I came here in '51. I went to get a room for my wife and for Betty and myself. [Unclear]... basement getting along real fine until he said 'what do you do?' I said 'I'm a pipefitter. I work on construction.' He said 'not in my house. I don't want construction workers in my house.' I said, 'what is the matter with you sir?' He said, 'I don't want construction workers in my house. Don't want you in this city'. So I went to a place on 97 Street and down the block they wouldn't rent to me when they found out I was a construction worker. They said 'we don't want you people. You're not steady enough. You come in from all over Canada and when the work is gone, you're gone.' I said 'well, what do you expect me to do? Work in the city and starve?' You know. 'We don't want you'. I went to another man, I won't mention his name, he was a businessman, he used to make money selling dirty shirts. But, he wouldn't sell me a suit. He said 'I don't want a construction worker as part of my clientele' You see the people of Edmonton felt detached from construction. They felt it really wasn't going to do them a lot of good. Somehow it was going to take away from the steady lifestyle they had. Very ultra-conservative lifestyle in those days. You might remember the women drank in the suburb of St. Albert, they couldn't drink in the city. And so on. And so socially it was totally different too.

Interviewer: Well, there'd been a big change in the [technician adjusting Lee's equipment] work for construction workers is changed dramatically though, and not quite

as seasonal as it used to be. The industry of construction workers was that you worked in the summer time and not in the winter time, right?

Sam: Well, you knew you were gonna get laid off in the spring because of the road bans, so you automatically knew that. And they worked in the summertime when the weather was good and they didn't work in the wintertime I don't exactly know why, I don't know all the reasons except maybe the cost of borrowing money to build these plants ??? from shutting down for half the year.

Interviewer: Well they used to. See it was too costly. The productivity went down too low when when it was cold. So when I ge- I would imagine these people would not want construction workers because they have seasonal work and maybe they couldn't pay the rent?

Sam: Well, they were afraid of that, they were. They were afraid that the construction worker was gonna move out and then they'd have to rent out again and they were looking for steady renters.

Interviewer: Yah, and not that you weren't. You had to save, save money in the summer time so you could live in the winter time.

Sam: Well that was it. That was it. We had a saying you know and it was 'chicken in the summer and feathers in the fall'. (laughs)

Interviewer: Well, another area that I wanted to talk to you about with the construction is that construction's had one of the highest accident rates. You know there're more accidents in construction over the years and before that than there have been in the industrial worker in other areas. Construction and well fuels, the areas where accidents take place. Can you reflect a little bit on the the safety aspects of construction.

Sam: Oh yeah. I'd like to go broader than that and talk about safety totally because it's a big thing to me. One of my first life experiences of work is when we did live in Northern

Manitoba, a place called Fairford, and they built a dam across the river, all hand-work in those days And I, I had a thing I used to get on that old horse of ours and take two stone jugs full of ice water I pumped out of the well. Wrapped them in a wet sack, climb on that horse and ride to the construction site of the dam. And give this cool drinking water to the workers. And they'd send me up to the kitchen and the old cook up there would give me something fancy there to eat. And I remember then going there one day and there was a guy laying on the stone bowl beside a ditch and with blood coming out of his mouth and he had flies, and it was hot and he was laying there and he was moaning and I stopped, looked at him and they covered him and when they got up they waved from there and they said 'you get away from there'. The timber from the dam had fallen on the man's chest and crushed him. And when I left he was still laying there. He lay there until the section foreman came by in a speeder. And took him eight miles to the hospital. And after it was over the people said, 'well what a terrible shame he died.' You couldn't blame anybody it's one of those things. Couldn't blame the foreman for not leaving the job. He had to keep the men working. Just one of those things. There's a guy with a wife and couple of young kids, dead? One of those things.

Many years later I started work at the camp cell from Braun & Root and they called us in one day and gave us a little talk on safety and they said 'now, six of you people are going to die, in the building of this job. We worked it all out. We know the fault trees and all this stuff. Six of you are going to die. Try not to be one of the six.' As I remember right, they only killed five. So, it was successful. The cost of that job was six men. When I left the advisory board on compensation, the government had just promised it finally said 'zero tolerance' no deaths are allowable. On any job. Construction or otherwise. So there's been a great onus placed on the safety and it has improved tremendously. Although not enough. It's got a long way to go yet. You and I both know that. But, you know they're still killing us off with acids and gases and so on (laughs) and asbestos, but, at least it has improved tremendously. The safety.

Interviewer: Well there's a physical aspect and of course uh the occupational health.

Sam: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...aspect of it. So, were you given any safety awareness courses or what not back in the fifties?

Sam: Well, now saying 'six of you are gonna die, try not to be one of the six', now that was a safety course. Huh?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sam: And, you know aside from that, I went out to another job and it was a working plant and they said 'now, if that stack starts to belch, one would always look to see which way the wind is blowing and don't run down wind the gas will catch up to you, run up-wind – that was the safety course in that plant. Just to make sure you knew you were running in the right direction when uh- (laughs) whenever the stack starts to belch. (laughs)

Interviewer: Well, Sam, let's go a little bit now on some of the things that happened inside the labour movement and the federation, you'd been an officer of the federation, you'd been like you said earlier, every position that the pipefitters had you sort of held. So what was it like as a policy person. What do you remember most about the federation activities?

Sam: Well I remember most about the federation activities as compared to being a member of a construction union, construction unions were inward looking at that time. I remember I used to get up at the meeting and talk politics and get booed. For, for just talking politics, they looked inward. The federation didn't. It was an outward going movement we had committees, for instance we had a committee that dealt with farmers, we had a committee that dealt with the co-ops and so on. And it was an outward thing. And I, I always felt that's the way labour had to go. I always felt that we were a force a society force and should not be you know inward reactionary.

Interviewer: You had social responsibilities?

Sam: We do and the federation I think did more than anything else to bring attention to those responsibilities to the individual. Member and to the individual unions, Neil. I think they did a good job of that in those days.

Interviewer: Of course they're an arm of the Canadian Labour Congress and so they they got some of their policy directions there I suppose...

Sam: I think they got most of them didn't they?

Interviewer: Yah. But they have provincial responsibility, what was there, generally their relationships with government?

Sam: I think okay we'll go back to Mr. Manning. I think with with Mr. Manning there was an understanding that he'd try to maintain an equilibrium. And you had to convince him that the balance was over here, not over there. But he was very much concerned about maintaining what he called balance and so you didn't for instance Ernie Manning would never have introduced Bill 11. Never. It was, it's too far in one direction. He would never've gone that way. But he did introduce bad legislation as far as we were concerned. And and what he felt was simply maintaining the balance. And I thought he kept us on our toes. I thought he made the labour unions very much aware of the need to be politically active and the need to have working relationship with the government the best you could. Then we got Mr. Lougheed and he was not so good to us. He was. You see the trouble with Lougheed is that he seemed to be fair and he spoke as though he was very fair and he was kind to some of the unions and so we tried to walk arm-in-arm and you know you c- uh whenever anyone gets kind to the union, the union goes right down the tube. You can't have that. (Laughs) You know, we, we are antagonistic by nature I guess, I don't know, but you can't – it lulls the union to sleep. The first thing you know you have labour union leaders buying \$400 suits. And then you know you're in trouble, you know I remember those old labour leaders god, uh they dressed like the working man, they used to wear old?? Coat that was dyed brown, and you know one black shoe, one brown shoe. They looked like the lead actor in a Russian movie.

But they were with the people all the way them old guys, old Managhan(sp?) and guys like that eh? And now you see 'em they want to drive big cars and suits and they say, 'I'm a businessman'. Say hey, well then who have I got? If you are a businessman (laughs) who have I got, 'cause I'm not, I'm a worker.' And so I think when the governments and the employers smarten up and become very very friendly to us, we start to lose something.

Interviewer: Well I want to remind you about Mr. Manning when the Canadian Labour Congress was formed in the appointed the CCF I suppose or the New Democrats later on as a political arm of labour, he took actively, had the AOPE(sp?) withdraw from the congress. Do you remember that?

Sam: Yup.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sam: It upset his ??? the pendulum was swinging too far in one direction. Yah.

Interviewer: Well he nevertheless is, his pendulum was off-centre many times wouldn't you say?

Sam: I would think so. Certainly from my point of you. I would that's what I say. We used to go on down there and say 'hey you know, swing it back' (Laughs) You've gone too far the other way.

Interviewer: Well then we had Mr. Getty, that's when they started to if I remember correctly, to not recognize interest groups, and labour was an interest group. They asked me if I were to take that world world-wide trip and study labour legislation.

Sam: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...and I said 'well if it's uh if I get uh parted by the federation I will unless going there to represent Neil Rymer(sp?). And they wouldn't ask the federation and so I didn't go. But you were totally – the federation was sort of pushed aside don't you think?

Sam: Well, see you know what happened at that time is we started to destroy ourselves. If you remember the construction unions had an argument with the CLC over the electricians in Quebec.

Interviewer: ...with IBW.

Sam: IBW in Quebec. And very foolishly, and against an awful lot of us did everything we could to stop it. But they broke away. And the government let's stop here for a second. You have to understand, Mr. Getty was totally a caretaker, totally a caretaker. Mr. Getty did not run his inner caucus. You know that and I know that. You know there was six people won't bother naming them, that ran the government at that time and they saw this opportunity so they immediately jumped on the bandwagon and started appointing. And they were smart, they would go to the Federation the same, like they did with you. ??? They'd go on a trip and Federation would say no. And so then they would go to the construction industry and they were going to the international representatives. And saying, 'we want to appoint'. And they would say 'yes'. And they had us committing cannibalism, really. Really it was a bad, bad hard time then. We tried very hard in Alberta some of us. Uh, to, Don Akens(sp?) and Harvey Foran(sp?) tried very hard to keep the thing together even though we had to do it unofficially. Because officially the construction trades were out of the CLC but we couldn't.

Interviewer: Well, there was another area, getting back to the construction trades, that the industry established union free construction companies. Satellites.

Sam: Yah.

Interviewer: How did that work?

Sam: Well you see during what happened was we were on a committee called CIRC(sp??) and it was an advisory to the ministry of Labour on construction. And it was a pretty fair committee. It wasn't a bad committee. When Crawford was there it worked very good. Then Bertie Hoho(sp??) you know Bert never, too much effort and the money. Then we got the screaming eagle. And Les John(name??) was gonna change the world. Les John was very aggressive in his own life that he was gonna be appointed one of the big people in the Alberta Government here. And he had too many enemies inside the caucus. (Laughs) Les couldn't make it but he kept trying so he decided one day he was gonna end all strikes. And he was gonna change the legislation. So we did an awful lot of scrambling to save what we could because he was throwing the baby out with the bath water? And he was doing this on being convinced it had to be done by inside his own caucus. And brought in some very bad legislation. And I can recall men hours and hours and hours of work with Demenski(sp??) the Deputy Minister of Labour and with Les trying to get that legislation turned around. Well, the first crack was when they legislated the nurses back to work. And we, we were promised by Les that wa- was sunset legislation and would have a sunset clause would only be done once. And would never be done again.

And in the meantime [unclear??] ... a year in which to come up with some answers as to how to deal with this so-called essential service. But they didn't do it. Instead of doing that, they started back in on the other trades and at first they came along and they changed the jurisdiction the there were the older [unclear??] ... build a plant and this part of it is construction and this part of it isn't. And we'd say what do you mean it isn't. It's not construction. [unclear??] ... but it's not in the plant. And they had changed the legislation because don't forget I had the books here by the way. [unclear??] wrong table talks. That started ten years earlier. And if you read those talks you would see that everything that happened to us had been planned for ten years and then eventually fifteen years, and then twenty years. They had a 20 year plan, we had a 20 minute plan in labour.

So, this stuff came in and they moved quietly and de- and we used to do certain things. The next thing we knew, we had no jurisdiction outside the construction limits.

Interviewer: ...the site itself?

Sam: The site itself. And we had no say in how big the site was. So for instance down at Red Deer they built a considerable amount of work a hundred feet away. And where the construction workers were, we weren't allowed to even go there and talk to those people, and some of us said, 'walk off the job. Walk off the job'. But at that time there was a group of people in there that felt that we got farther by co-existing and that well let's stay and talk to them and we'll gradually swing it back.

But you know and I know Neil, that unless you get all the weight of the members behind you, you're trying to push back against all the weight of the dollars on the other side, and you don't push back. You have to have all the members behind you. We have some labour leaders that forgot a very important thing. That they're really just tokenism. Labour is labour. It's the workers. That's what's gotta be organized, that's what's gotta be educated, that's just gotta be motivated. But, two or three people, huppf. [Unclear] ... Got two or three people motivated. (laughs) It doesn't work that way. Am I right?

Interviewer: Yah well...

Sam: We forgot that didn't we?

Interviewer: Yah. While the building trades have changed a lot, there was a lot of objection to the jurisdictional disputes on the job right? What, can you comment on that, how it was and how it is today.

Sam; Yah, the younger fellow, jurisdiction changed because technology changed.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: And with the change of technology, the journeyman lost a lot of swack on the job. For instance now-a-days, if you go out to Scotford(sp?) where they built that refinery, pipe-fitters can't make a lift more than 500 lbs. Unless the engineer comes and draws him

a drawing. That's for safety they say. What it's done is stripped the pipe-fitter from his initiative to learn and to [unclear] his trade. So, they've become in a way, the technology has taken away from the tradesman an awful lot. And the pride of craft is down a little, not much, but a little. So the younger man said, 'look, I walk off the job, I lose two or three days pay, the union is forced back on the job, we pay all kinds of legal fees for these illegal walk-offs, we're paying you guys big money. You settle those arguments before we get on the job. More and more pressure on the leaders to sell. More and more need for a settlement method. And that's where the disputes inquiry now comes in as jurisprudence dispute board now comes in. And it's really more from pressure from the workers than from anybody else. They say, I don't mind walking off the job if I'm gonna win. I don't want to walk off the job, be forced back on and then lose. So.

Interviewer: So there not as ready as....

[technical adjustment]

Interviewer: Sam, you indicated earlier on that you agree with labour playing a social role and that's the way we had to go. Just, you observed society here now from 1951 to fifty years, half a century, your labour movement has involved itself politically, you were there I think when the New Democratic Party was formed. So can you comment on the social aspects of the contribution as you see, that labour's made to society.

Sam: Oh, ye-yes, you know. Labour is [unclear] in that they don't really, they view this and they search this and publish it. Just as one example, some years ago I was having a debate with Mr. Bentsford(sp?) a labour minister (laughs) or was labour minister at that time, about the whole of labour. And I pointed out to him, we were in the bottom of that downward spiral caused by the government here and rollbacks and so on. And I asked him if he had any idea how much money was being spent in this city by union people who were retired, and were spending their union pension. And he didn't. Frankly I didn't either. But I know that in the course of a year, it's millions and millions and millions of dollars. Tens of millions, twenties of millions of dollars.

When wh- I started here in 1953, I got involved with a unit in bargaining. We said, we need a pension plan. And the employer said, save your money like everybody else. You don't need a pension plan (laughs). '68 our pension plan came in. And it was on the negotiating table from 1953 to 1968. We got a pension plan on the table. Now nineteen hundred and eighty-six, the bottom was falling out. As we warned it would if it downward spirals, then you can't stop that. Talk about inflation all you like, it's not as deadly as deflation. So anyhow, suddenly the union is coming to people, older guys. They said we lowered our retirement age to 58, please retire. We've a lot of young people trying to raise families and no work. So a lot of the old guys said, 'ah what- why not'. They retired. But now, where do they get their money? What keeps them going on the dole? What keeps them spending in the stores? The union pensions. Just that alone saved this area from a very severe depression. Just that alone. Again you should start gathering that information and letting people know and understand, you know. So, that's the first thing.

The second thing is in we bargained a health plan. You know, we said, we want, medicare's fine, but we want a health plan. And, so we bargained a health plan. We pay in my unit 80% of drugs we pay for for glasses, for dental so on and so forth. Many things that aren't covered in medicare and aren't covered with Blue Cross either. But we pay. And it's a considerable amount of money a year.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: You know. That money is spent in this community, helping to keep people healthy, so we're not a drag on the dole, on society. So you haven't got. When I was a young man growing up, young kid growing up back in Winnipeg, men retired to die (laughs) [unclear] they try hard not to give you a pension and then they give you a pension they try to keep you from getting it. You had to be 65. You generally didn't get the pension 'til you were 66, you were dead when you were 67. People didn't even live that long you know?

Interviewer: Yah

Sam: In that time. But now, people are re- living longer, but they're still contributing to society. Because of that health plan, that the unions have done [unclear]. My union has a fund that's got a supplementary benefit fund, and we pay about \$2 million a year to bursaries for our members' children. This is bursaries are only \$500, it used to be \$1,000. But this is to NAIT or SAIT, Grant McEwan, the university here, to help offset the cost of their youngsters getting a better education. So, in those ways, the unions contributed tremendously since I've been active. But there's still the traditional contribution. A lot of people don't understand. They think you go on strike – let's use construction. I I wa- [unclear] for the construction and I'm [unclear]. Our people go out on strike. Everybody says we're greedy. But they got to remember I'm [unclear]. I say to that employee, 'Here's something, here's a cost to building a factory in this area. Two years down the road I'm gonna tell you exactly what that cost is. Now we're talking about anywhere from 30% to 70% of the cost of building your plant. And I can guarantee you that cost to them for two years in advance. Oh hell, I'm not a fortune teller. I've gotta try and vision what that cost is gonna be. And establish it.

Interviewer: ...and live with it.

Sam: And live with it. But more than that, when that you've established all the supporting industries, what that cost is, now when we didn't do that. There was a three year period of time when we didn't do that, and it was chaos in this city. People didn't realize it. But employers were saying, 'I can't bid. I don't know what you buggers are gonna do to me next month. You may go on strike, you may go to work'. So, and we took that what do you call it that that balance of evening out of out of it out of the industry, the industry couldn't really live. They couldn't really live.

And what they started to do was give our people raises. Even though we weren't bargaining them. To try and maintain their [unclear] ... Okay we'll [unclear] the cost all by ourselves. They couldn't do it. So, unions, all unions, when your bargain wages, you're bargaining the price of oh I don't call it a commodity, but it's sort of the same thing. It's like if you went to Safeway, and said 'you gotta tell me what a beef roast is

gonna cost two years from now, and live with it.' They can't do that. They don- they certainly don't even want to try. We in unions do that, labour does that. People don't understand that...

Interviewer: Well I guess what you're saying are also representation for minimum wages, that kind of thing.

Sam: Well of course.

Interviewer: ...make a social contribution.

Sam: Of course. But you know eh, when a pipefitter gets a raise, the engineer on the job gets one too.

Interviewer: ...mm hmmm.

Sam: You know there is, there is that domino effect. Yah.

Interviewer: Well Sam you spent 50 yrs, you retired now?

Sam: Oh yeah. Retired, retired and tired.

Interviewer: Can you sum up your reflections and past are you happy you did what you did. Are you would you like to do it all over again or are you looking at the future as a retiree?

Sam: No. I'll tell you what I would not want to do over again. I would never want to do over again. And I gotta say you know that life has been good to me. The memories of my brothers in the union have been good to me, and my God has been very good to me. And you know, I can't complain. About any of it. I wish, somethings had been different. But then I'm still learning. You know I'm still learning about people and I'm, one thing I'm learning about people is that nothing is forever. And sometimes I kind of wish some of it

was. I look, I'm still fighting for things now that I fought and got 50 years ago, and I gotta fight for them all over again (laughs)

And so you know you're saying 'God I wish I didn't have to keep going through that'. But, no I realize how can I complain? How can I complain? I've been so fortunate. I've really got no brains and you know, I'm not the toughest guy in the world, and I've had people choose me to to represent them and to lead them and to recess them in their life and make your life better. And that's just got to be a blessing. And as I say, my God has been good to me. He's given me three very fine sons that I don't deserve. Ummh, he's given me the best disease in the world that I can have, I'm a diabetic and very close to being an alcoholic and they're almost the same. Because you yourself can control alcoholism and you can control diabetes. And I was never an alcoholic because I didn't go to those meetings, but aside from that, I drank as much as the rest of them. But the diabetes I control it. You know. It's up to me. So, you can't complain about a life like that.

Interviewer: Well thank you very much Sam.

Sam: Okay.

Interviewer: You came to Edmonton, you went to work for Braun & Root so just and then you tell me you had all these positions in the labour movement. Just what attracted you to labour.

Sam: [unclear] The thanks for that is in a way goes to goes to my dad. He was a firm believer that people shouldn't, if they're interested in something try it. See if you like it or not. You know. Now he was not a union man. Didn't really like unions. But I was working for the outfit in Winnipeg – Crane Ltd. And one of the guys [unclear] was a teamster. And he come along quietly in the background and invited us to a meeting. And I went home and talked to my dad and said 'what do you think about it?' He said, 'are you interested?' And I said, 'yah, I am'. He said, 'then go. Always go when you're interested'. So I went to this meeting and I came away from there a bit impressed but not

too much. But five days or six days later, they called eight of us in and laid us off. We were eight of the nine people at the meeting.

The ninth guy they transferred. So you know who squealed huh? And I went home and I talked to my dad about that. And he said 'Well, what do you want to do about that?' I said, 'nothing. I'll go work for someone else'. He said 'okay. Don't forget about it though.' And I started thinking. I thought 'well, if that union idea is so bad for that company and they're gonna lay me off just for talking about it, my God, maybe it's good for me. I better talk about it some more.' (laughs)

So I did, and the next job I got was up at Flinsflon(sp?). The unemployment insurance sent me up there. And I got up there just in time for them to go on strike, they couldn't go to work. And I had no money. And them guys on strike took me in and fed me, gave me lots of beer, told me what strike was all about two unions you might remember fighting to see who would get that jurisdiction, they were gonna choose a union. It was between the Mine Mill.

Interviewer: And steel...

Sam: And Steel. Yah. I remember that. I remember listening to them just talk and them guys them two of them those rascals were as different as chalk and cheese but they knew about unions. And I watched those guys [unclear] those workers. I watched the ones that were good union workers, and the ones that weren't and I had to leave after about five days because they couldn't afford to keep on feeding me. But I come out of there and I thought 'boy there's a lot to that union isn't there. There's really a lot to that union'.

So I went to work out of the union in Winnipeg, pipe-fitters union on a permit because they wouldn't let me in, they wouldn't let anybody in. They thought they were big enough and in those days they controlled the trade but a number of people they'd let into it had let out trade secrets that they wouldn't tell anybody. And I kept thinking, 'this has got to be worth joining'. And why won't they let me in? And why does this boss want to fire me if I get in? And so it kept my interest up.

And when I got here it was a vastly different union. They were taking everybody in. You you know. If you could qualify, you could join. So that's how I got into it.

Interviewer: Supply for labour was short?

Sam: Yah. Yah.

Interviewer: So, then you got with the pipefitters, you were a steward?

Sam: Yah.

Interviewer: You were local union officer?

Sam: Yah.

Interviewer: [unclear]

Sam: Committee member. I was the vice-president to president to business-agent to business manager, And I worked at CIL(sp?) on maintenance, and joined your union. And I was a shop steward out there.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: And but you have a different way of voting. Because I didn't go to the meeting. I heard they were gonna nominate me. So I didn't go to the meeting. And they elected me.

Interviewer: You should know that trick by now.

Sam: Yes. I found out, well I found out then. (laughs) So, when I say my God has been good to me, and that people have been good to me for some reason people thought through the years I never understood why, that they could rely somewhat on me at least

and that I would represent them. I would do my best I could to represent them. And they would choose me.

Interviewer: And that gave you satisfaction eh?

Sam: Oh well you know I'm as vain as any other man. Certainly you feel proud and satisfied that guys that you respect and admire have you know chosen you to to lead them or to represent them.

Interviewer: Well wouldn't you be interested in a union because you wanted to make a difference?

Sam: In society?

Interviewer: Yah, or on the job or...

Sam: Well, I wanted to make a difference in a not only on the job I think. To me on-the-job is just part of your life, part of society. I wanted to make a difference in society Neil. I'm sorry I didn't make a better one, if I made any at all. But yah, that's what kept me involved in the union. And then and you know, right now, I don't like the things they're doing a lot of them, but you know there's no way you lose belief or faith in that movement.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: You can't huh.

Interviewer: You mentioned a lot of the things you won at the bargaining table. I'd be interested in also 'cause you were active at places like the fed in some of the political battles that you fought during your time. What are the important political battles that you think you were, played a part in?

Sam: I think most important of all, is to get labour to recognize more widely the need for political involvement. You know that was always a concern to me. You might remember when I ran for the NDP. I went into my union and you know, no bad feelings about this I said 'I want to run for the NDP'. Now if I get elected I want to be able to contribute myself to my pension plan and to my health plan. And they said, 'the hell you will. We have rules. You've got to be working for a union contractor to make a contribution. And if we let you make and break those rules we let everybody break the rules so, good luck if you get elected, but you can't contribute to the pension plan.

So, I said, 'oh well, okay'. I said, 'well then I'd like to raise some money'. And so they said 'sure'. And they put up one of those cans with a slit in it and a sign on it saying Sam Lee's campaign contribution. And they stuck that up in the hall where the guys paid their dues. In case they wanted to drop change into it. (Laughs) Said, 'now you get up at the meeting and I'll ask if anyone wants to give you some money. But that's the end of it. You know as a union we are not actively involved in politics' Now years later, the biggest manager in my union ran for the New Democratic Party got supported by the union, got funded by the union and won, the election. And I thought that I had made a very significant contribution to his winning that election, just by the fact that I stood up and ran 20 years earlier.

Interviewer: Broke the ice?

Sam: Broke the ice, yah. And that's I guess maybe, I'm as proud of that as anything.

Interviewer: I want to also get you to talk a bit about your photo collection in a sec. But there was one other question, just 'cause we're also working with a woman who's doing some labour music, do you remember songs or anything that people used to sing.

Sam: Labour music?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sam: Oh. Good heavens!

Interviewer: I'm not asking you to sing. Just do you remember some?

Sam: Well you know, 'Up and down the bard(sp?) road in and out of the eagle that's the way the money goes, pop goes the weasel' The leedo(sp?) craft, is in London that's the song of the steel workers, right?

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: That's how labour songs working people for years have sang songs of their life and there's lots of them you know. That guy, Oscar Brand(sp?) look how many he sang about labour people and so on. And songs of Wobolee(sp?) is brought in. We have all kinds of songs about the labour movement. I think I've got one downstairs. The latest one is the Battle of 66 Street

Interviewer: ...mmm hmm.

Sam; [unclear] May be the latest one that I can remember. But we have all kinds of them and there's some really great songs, really good songs, I used to have it at the union hall a tape of about 30 of them, including the song that the miners in Saskatchewan. So I'm because you know our history is a history of people. That's all it is it's a history of the people, and the songs of the people are part of that history. I hope that lady does a good job of bringing that out and showing that out you know that yah.

Interviewer: Great. Umh, I think that's all the notes I had. Oh, I was going to ask you one other question. You were talking about in the 50s there, you know when you were starting to become active with unions. What were people's attitude towards the union?

Sam: One neighbor beside me, good [unclear] but didn't understand why, didn't understand I wouldn't keep on working, or work slower or do bad work, so they'd pay me money and smarten up. And I tried to explain to him that my loyalty was to my union,

to my trade. I'd have eight or nine employers a year. I couldn't possibly have loyalty to the employers. The guy behind me was had been a union man and understood, and used to come and talk to me about the technical parts of it and so on. The fellow beside me had been a union electrician and now run his own company. And he thought it was sad that I would have to go on strike. But he didn't think it was really such a great thing. And sympathized with me, but at the same time wondered if I realized what I was doing to my wife and my family by putting them through this turmoil. The fellow on the other side behind me was non-union and didn't like unions. And his wife, well when I was on strike used to sneak over early in the morning or late at night and throw her garbage into my yard. So, [laughs] you realize that there's a lack of understanding on the part generally of people, about labour negotiations and about strike. I've always said I never went on strike in my life. I've been on lots of strikes. I never went on strike. I said to the boss 'if I can't get a better deal I gotta go on strike' and he said 'then I invite you to go on strike. Go ahead'. I only ever went on strike after I got invited to the party. But you know, the average person their attitude, I'm totally responsible. I'm the guy that forced the issue, I'm the guy that went on strike. So, there isn't really an understanding. And that's surprising to you until you study it I guess. So many people who are workers don't seem to understand that you either bargain an agreement, you bargain a new wage or you take what you're given. And as I said earlier, by taking what you're given is day to day? You don't bring that continuity to the cost. Anyhow.

Interviewer: Okay. That's great. Okay, let's get you...

[technical adjustment]

Sam: This is the executive board of the Federation of Labour back in the 60's and don't ask me the day. I can't remember. This fellow was a bricklayer by trade his name Murdock(sp?) and he was the president at that time. And this is Roy Jamma(sp?). Who was vice-president at that time, Roy was vice. And this is Bodie(sp?)

Interviewer: Frank Bodie?

Sam: Frank, Frank was a, a sort of a...

Interviewer: Executive director?

Sam: Executive director yah. This is Jean Mitchell from rubber workers at that time or your people.

Interviewer: Oh he was with us, he was with the Commercial Solvency of Medicine Hat.

Sam: Yah. And here's old Pat Lanaghan(sp?). And that's...

Interviewer: Keith Johnson.

Sam: Keith Johnson, Dave Graham.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: And he was very active here in the city and the city council and the red feather thing and so on, and myself. Here's the same group and it had expanded somewhat. And it's a little later on. Maybe a year or two later. And Dave Graham, Peter Uginis(sp?) from Packing House, Keith Johnson, Brodie(sp?), a fellow called 'Steel(sp?)' from Steel.

Interviewer: Les Steel.

Sam: Les Steel from the Steel Workers? Bob Jamma(?), Pat Lanaghan(?), myself and Jean Mitchell, we were, we were a pretty close knit group actually.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: At that time and I can recall we used to have some real great debates and it took us a while sometimes to get to a disa-, to an agreement. But when we got there we knew

which way we were going because we would thrash it out pretty good. And this is basically the same people.

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam; With the exception of Dick Noble(sp?)

Interviewer: Yah.

Sam: Or is it Richard Noble(sp?)? I think it was. Noble's(sp?) his last name. Now here's a very much expanded. Because they expanded and they brought in representation from Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge and so on.

Interviewer: Labour council?

Sam: Yah labour council representatives. And so, I'm not sure I can remember all of these people.

Interviewer: That's Henry Thomas Chek(sp?)

Sam: Yah. This is Graham, Uginis(sp?), Johnson, Bodie(sp?), Jamma(sp?), Pat Lanaghan(sp?), Steel, Jimmy Shewchuck(sp?), boy called Driscoll. Boy, I can't remember him. He's from Red Deer but I can't remember him.

Interviewer: Patterson is next.

Sam: That's Bill Patterson.

Interviewer: Oh yah, congress rep.

Sam: Yah. Hill.

Interviewer: Gill.

Sam: Gill(sp?) or something like that. I don't remember him. Henry Thomas Chek(sp?), Jean Mitchell, Murdock and myself. Ayyy. Hmmmm. This is basically the same people over here. And now we get away from Federation and this is that group I was telling you about, the advisory committee to the construction industry they called it. KIRK(sp?) was made up of government management and labour. Some of the management for instance, this fellow here, was a Syncrude person. Uh, boy, and his name I know it, but it escapes me. Maybe I'll get it back.

Interviewer: Not Newell?

Sam: No. Not Newell. Not Newell at all. Remember the guy that was a, worked as a treasurer for the was a good friend of Lougheed's? Came out of Mannix? And he worked as the financial advisor and his name was Th-

Interviewer: I don't remember his name.

Sam: This guy has a name almost identical. Very, very excellent person. This is a guy called Harold Reed, from another construction outfit and of course these people are representative from the what I used to call the contractor's union. There the organization we dealt with. And these are government people. And there's the screaming eagle.

Interviewer: Debenski(sp?)

Sam: Debenski(sp?) I thought was a very fine fellow died(?), was best, Harold Tarrel(sp?) from the electricians. A guy called Ken Clarke(sp?) was a fellow from Vectal(sp?). This is a boy from the operating engineers.

Interviewer: Oh yah.

Sam: You remember him?

Interviewer: Yah I do.

Sam: This is a guy from the paper mill in Hinton. I think Hall's his name. We used to meet regularly. To discuss problems of the construction industry. And how to get around it. We made some real progress on some issues and absolutely none on the others.