

Willa Gorman

KEYWORDS

Celanese

fibers

chemicals

xanthates

safety

Energy and Chemical Workers Union

WG: My name is Willa Gorman. I was employed on August 30, 1965. I had actually trained as a medical lab technician. But chemical lab technicians were few in those days, so I was hired to work at Celanese in fibers, which really wasn't chemical either because it was in the fiber department where they made yarn and a bit of cigarette tow. I think they had a maximum of 4 lines at that point, but they made both arnel and acetate yarn. There were many women working in fibers, working with the yarn. It was amazing to watch the ladies, how they had to doff or take the bobbins off the machines in time with a little chain that ran along. Of course the chain was speeded up all the time, so they had to work harder and faster. Their dexterity and the work that they had to do-- these weighed up to 5 pounds each and they would have to move them around with big trolleys. It was very hard work for the women. In the lab we worked 24 hours a day 7 days a week. We worked with chemicals with absolutely no safety as we know it now. We just didn't respect the chemicals in that day and age like we do now, and have the knowledge that we do.

Q: What sort of chemicals were you working with?

WG: We used acetone. It dissolved the arnel, the acetate yarn. And methalene chloride for arnel yarn, and Karl Fischer for testing for water. Water was added as an ingredient in making the yarn, and it had to be at an exact percentage. So we tested that. And temple chemicals ??, which we didn't realize in those days. In the later years, this was all transferred. We even changed to different materials which were better on the safety scale. Fume hoods were used to evacuate chemicals and things. We used ether, lots of ether. A special room, all steam.

Q: What kind of products were you making? What were the end products? Where was all the stuff going, and what was it going to be used for?

WG: When I started, I started in fibers where they made acetate and arnel yarn. Slips, underclothes, maybe even into dresses for the yarn. Some of the heavier was used in carpet fibers I think. Then the other parts of the plant I didn't know that well, cellulose acetate was used to make the yarn, so it was a secondary one that they made themselves. They made chemicals as we know them: acetic acid, acetic anhydride. They made acrelites, and I never worked with those at all. Penaurithratol is used in paints and things like that. That was all made back in the '50s too. They also made one called xanthates. It was used on the mining industry for a floatation to separate the metals out of the ore. And some of them were just terrible to work with.

Q: Why terrible?

WG: This goes on a couple years later, but a fellow that worked in xanthates, we worked 7 day shifts where you worked for 7 days, had days off, and then 7 afternoons and days off, 7 nights, days off. He would work those days, and he'd get sores all around his nose from the xanthates. Then on his 4 days off he'd clear up and be better. He was probably just allergic to it. But working then in places where the chemicals weren't really controlled like they do now, we did have health and safety programs and things. The union got involved, and the safety was really brought up much more and improved over the years, through total knowledge and union involvement both. It increased the safety and the health of the workers. We talk about unions wanting money all the time; that wasn't always the case. Often it was a safety or health issue that we would discuss for a long time to get a resolution for.

Q: How did the union deal with these issues? Are we talking about committees, or are we talking about bargaining?

WG: Both. We had many, many committees. Some worked much better than others. Depending on the staff people and their level of agreement, the level that they had to take responsibility and make things happen, the committees worked. They were up and down over the years. I was at Celanese, I had started my 40th year by the time I retired, so I was there a long time. I was there for several years before I got really involved in the union. But I remember within my first 6 weeks being involved in the union already. Probably my family all said, to the horror of my father, because he was an anti-union man. But if we don't work together where are we going to be? You have to work together and do your

part. As workers, you work with the company. You have to do a good job. Don't take advantage of it, because I don't appreciate that. There are the odd person that will say, well I'm safe, I'm a union member. But that's not right. You're here to do a job. Do your job and let's work together for the betterment of everyone.

Q: So you came from an anti-union background, but still you got involved. What made you decide to get involved? Do you remember the first incidents that made you decide to get involved?

WG: Not really. But thinking, that's my money, I want to know where it's going and what they're doing with it. Aren't we all there partly for money? I went to find out, and became involved in the attitudes and the actions, and learned more and spent a lot of time working and trying to promote and protect others with our union rights.

Q: Do you remember what were some of the first positions you held? Do you remember some of the earliest people you were involved with?

WG: Some of the people. Morris Stark passed away very suddenly. We lost a good chief steward; he'd been in that position for many years. Actually, Ed Ewasiuk, who ended up on city council, was the first union president when I started. I'd worked a few years and had stopped to have a child. In those days, Celanese didn't want the women working past 5 months, because they didn't want the flowing smocks we wore in those days; it was too dangerous near the machinery. So they expected all the women to quit at 5 months of pregnancy. Of course some of them would hide it. In my time, tent dresses were in, where

you just wore a loose flowing dress. So that hid it easy for us, and it was the wardrobe of the day so it was okay. You quit work early in your pregnancy, and we were not allowed to go back to work for 3 months after the baby was born. I was ready to go back early, but they wouldn't allow me to go back. I had to wait, even that extra week beyond which I took as of the shortest leave you could take at that point. We were given maternity leave, but no money of any shape or form, no unemployment, nothing. Though I think my girlfriend took 18 months off. She was allowed that much time. So it's different how the times have changed till when they were legislated. Many years later one of the girls, as soon as she became pregnant, was allowed to take the first 3 months off when that first vital development happens. So it's all, times change with the times, but those are some of the things that happened many years ago.

Q: Were there many women workers in the plant? Were there any other women's issues in the plant at that time that affect women workers as opposed to everybody?

WG: There were lots of women in fibers, because there would've been maybe 20 women per shift, just in fibers. I'm sure there were no women in any of the other units, except the secretaries or that type of thing. Probably in 1980 may have been one of the first women in a unit as an operator. Because there was a woman that started to work in vinyl acetate, and it was '79 or 1980 when it opened. Maybe it was '78, I don't remember. So it took many years for the women to be able to work in those other things. But I think I got sidetracked on something else we talked about.

Q: Can you remember any specific women's issues or concerns women raised? Were you paid the same as the men?

WG: There were very much women's jobs, and obviously I'm sure they were paid much less than the men. In the lab, the lab was actually organized to the union as lab technicians in the late '50s. It was a couple years after the plant had opened, and it was organized. We had girls' jobs and boys' jobs, although we were all paid the same as lab technicians; that part didn't change. But the research section, which was actually staff people, I don't know how they were paid in that day. I know in 1989, '90 I think it was, they got into this iso 9002 stuff. I was working on writing manuals for 22 years. I was paid only 5% above a senior lab tech. I don't even remember what happened, but anyway they changed the position and I was returned to a senior lab tech, with problems. The union filed a grievance. Because most of the other people that were doing these same manuals were getting 10% above their rate, I was able to get several thousands dollars settlement for my 2 years that I had worked at only 5% rather than the 10. They were just trying to be cheap if they can get away with it. So that was just a little thing. But when the women went into operations and things, they were paid per job, so they got the same rate. But the other women's jobs were certainly lower paid than the men's. There were lots of women lab technicians. We didn't get the first operator rate. We had to really fight for that, and then they moved ahead of us again.

Q: Social attitudes change over the years. Back in the '60s attitudes were a little different. We learn from talking about these things. Was there anything else about the way women were treated, anything else the women were concerned about in those days?

WG: Oh gee.

Q: Was there anything like sexual harassment?

WG: Oh I'm sure, yes. There was. I guess we just didn't say anything. One fellow had to feel the material on your skirt all the time. Another fellow, we used to call him Paws. I just got mad one day and hauled off and slapped him one, and he didn't talk to me for 2 or 3 months. But he didn't touch me again. But I'd just sort of go through it, and so be it. But ya, some guys were and did, and probably said things, but maybe it's me personally that doesn't quite catch it right away. But I'm sure there were lots of issues. I remember once going into a safety meeting and I was the only woman on the committee. Well, are you taking secretary duties? I said, no, I'm not a secretary, I'm not taking minutes. Well what's the matter, you're a woman. No, I'm not here to do the secretarial job. I'm here on the committee. I refused to do minutes. One of the men took it. But anyway I can't spell, so it's okay.

Q: Speaking of social attitudes, it's important we talk about these things, because people learn over the decades. What about the fact that you had a multi-cultural community? You really had a lot of people coming from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds working in that plant, or did you?

WG: From what I remember, there were very few. I don't remember anything but white, English, German, Ukrainian, the Edmonton mix. I don't think I even remember a single Negro in those days.

Q: East Indian, Chinese?

WG: No, no, not in those days. After maybe by the '80s, we said the lab was a little United Nations, because in the lab we had people from all over. By this time there were some women in fibers and other fellows out in the units, of other nationalities. But when we started, I think it was really just a very white majority totally. Probably back in 1980 from the lab people, I think 3 or 4 of us went to a baptism of one of the girls from the Philippines. We were the odd ones out. It was a good awaking for us, because we'd never been the odd one out. Everyone else was Filipino and there were 4 or 6 of us that were white, and we were the minority. That was something that wasn't part of the plant at all, that I remember.

Q: Do you recall if, when you started seeing some of these different populations coming in, do you recall any incidents or issues? Did the union try to do anything to educate people about how you should treat people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds?

WG: I don't recall any of that. The lab just sort of came and we thought nothing of it. It happened and they were just all people, at least to me for sure. We worked good together. I got to meet some nice people and enjoy some different cultures.

Q: You took union positions. In what ways did you serve the union over the years?

WG: I was a trustee for Celanese, and I was Secretary-Treasurer for a few years for the Celanese unit. Probably one of my best fun times was when ECWU, Energy and Chemical Workers Union, which was our union in those days, part of CEP now, had the national convention here in Edmonton. I looked after the spousal entertainment. I planned trips and activities for all the ladies and men that came with delegates, and their families. We had a wonderful convention back there with ECWU. It was very much a family affair in those days. I was on the unit executive for several years, there to assist whenever I could. Take your turn reading the settlement... I can't even think anymore. When we got a memorandum of agreement, reading the book before it was printed, and all that stuff.

Q: Speaking of that, were you on the bargaining committee?

WG: Actually once I was, as secretary, not as bargaining.

Q: Do you remember some of the issues the union was raising in those early years.

WG: Like I say, safety was a good one, health and safety. I think I remember fighting more over that than money. Money was always left to the end. But you fought on health and safety lots. That was a big one. Makeup and committees and things that people were permitted and not permitted to do.

Q: Explain how the union structure worked and where Celanese fit in.

WG: I say Celanese unit was part of Local 666 or 777. We started as Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, Local 666. It wasn't even a Canadian union. Then we got to a Canadian union. But Celanese was just part of a joint local, where there was Celanese and AT Plastics, and I think Petrocanada at first, Canada Cup, Canada Liquid Air. Many little entities joined together to make one local union. We had a bigger voice then I think. And a secretary some of the time, and some of it was volunteer secretary work. Carol Stewart did that for many years. So together we worked. Yet Celanese had its own little individual bargaining unit, and we ran all our own dues and moneys. Out of our dues, we had to give part to the local union to run it, and then to Alberta Federation of Labour. We each paid a per capita tax to all these places. So though we had our own work, we also worked within the local union too.

Q: You just mentioned the Alberta Federation of Labour. Were you involved in these wider union politics? Did you go to AFL or CLC? What do you remember about the Alberta Federation of Labour?

WG: We stole Harry Kostiuk. He wanted to have a room, and we got the room for ?? Maybe we don't count that. I went to AFL conventions and I also went to some women's conventions for AFL. So I was active in those types of things too, working together just with women. I went to some AFL schools in Lake Louise and here at Chateau Lacombe and schools in Edmonton. So we were able to partake of lots of those.

Q: And what do you remember about the feeling of what you were doing, when you were involved with this larger group?

WG: Getting to learn and talking with other people. Hearing things that happened and comparing it to our own situations, and finding ways of rectifying problems. It was always an opportunity that way. Working together for probably what must've been an AFL picket on the legislature when Medicare was going on. I took my husband, and he carried a sign "\$2100 So I Could See", because we'd paid for eye surgery for him. You had to wait; that's what it cost us. We were fortunate we could afford that. But there (are) many people that couldn't. That was a way of facing total social issues, not just Celanese issues. We worked on those. I picketed with Canada Packers and I stopped the truck in front of a bus going into Gainers, or Swifts to me, I'm real old. The policeman was quite upset because my truck stalled. Well I think I turned it off, but it "stalled". Get going.

...

From my understanding, my father was very anti-union. Unions were never discussed in our house, that I remember. I had one cousin who married a welder, and he was a union man. But he's the only person that I know of that I can remember that had anything to do with the union, until I started at Celanese. Union just wasn't something that happened. I have a cousin who helped in the decertification of a union out at one of the Fort Saskatchewan plants, I don't know which one it was. But he worked there and he helped get rid of the union. Why? I don't know why. Unions are not all bad.

Q: Who were some of the people who had a big influence on you?

WG: Ed Ewasiuk, Morris Stark, Carol Stewart, Bernie Fleural, Cec Kereluck, and of course Reg Basken.

Q: What do you remember about Reg Basken?

WG: I remember him as a very young man standing up there with his great big cigar, such a wonderful speaker, and leading us. He became such a wonderful union leader. He led us through many problems. He was our rep for quite a while and I don't remember when that quit. I don't know if he was our rep when we went on strike. Celanese had one strike in 1971. But I had gone off sick just a week or 2 before the strike began. I had been out tobogganing down ice hills and had broken my tailbone and couldn't walk. So I was off sick. We went on strike and I got permission to go back to work the day after the strike was settled. But I got sick pay all that time, and turned my sick pay over to the union and received strike pay back. I don't remember what the difference was. I could not picket, but because I was off sick and gave them my sick pay, they gave me strike pay. They had a community kitchen. Lots of the women worked in there and made soup and stuff for the picketers. Others worked and turned in their pay to the union.

Q: What was that strike about?

WG: I don't even remember. In those days I wasn't that involved in the union. I know that we got 1 cent, the strike gave us 1 cent and we'd been off for 6 weeks. It would take a long time to earn back all that money we lost at 1 cent. It was probably more safety and health issues, and vacation maybe. We fought over vacation. Another issue I remember

way back when was when Alberta went onto daylight saving time. Gary Fisher was human resources manager and Carol Stewart was on the executive. I think she was even chief steward then, but I'm not positive. He wanted to pay the guys each 11 hours pay and 12 hours pay when the changeover happened. But just a minute. Some guys had worked 13 hours and some guys have only worked 11. I remember we had a terrible fight over that one. If you only worked 11 hours when the clock goes back, you're really only there for 11 hours. But the other guys are there for 13 in the next session when the clock goes forward and you have to spend an extra hour. He didn't want to pay them that extra hour. Just little things like that.

Q: Go back to talking about some of the people.

WG: Carol Stewart. When Morris Stark passed away very sudden in I think '83, I was on the executive at that point. Carol was not on the executive, she was secretary of the local union, and very active. But here we were. There may have been one more girl on the executive, and we sat there with all these men. I wanted to tell them Carol should be our next chief steward. It was a little frightening to have to tell all these men that they should have a woman come in. But actually a couple of them came up with it too, so it really must've been a unanimous decision because of Carol's knowledge and activity. She took gold honours at her university, and actually she received the Woman's Day award from AFL one year. I don't remember what year that was, but probably in the late '80s I would say. But she was just a vital part of Celanese and our union advancement there. She was so good. She kept records like you wouldn't believe, and just was so good at writing and talking. She could argue with the staff members when need be. Bernie Fleural, absolutely

marvelous as secretary-treasurer for many years. Louis Yakamishon, Cec Kereluck, Terry Sawchuk, Reg Gerome, Dennis Ari who went on to be a staff member, Tom Enright, all people that worked hard for the union over the years. Bill Climie, another lab person. We had many people in the lab for several years. At one point they could not even get a steward out of fibers. No one in fibers would partake in the union. Bill Climie from the lab was the fiber steward, because he was part of the fibers lab. That was the reasoning, but they couldn't get anyone. At the end I think our chief steward and one of the last presidents and numerous other positions were all people out of fibers. But as the staff members changed, the union involvement changed. When you're harassed all the time you go for help and say, oh maybe I should work with this. Where I guess when things are going along so good you just take it all for granted, and that's part of just growing up in our whole social life, is taking for granted what we have. You don't realize the fights that people have put up for these perks or things that you take for granted. People have fought for this. Just like we know about the war: our grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought for our freedom. Well union people have fought. I think now we have to fight to change some of the labour laws in Alberta maybe.

Q: What's wrong with them, in your view?

WG: Your minimum wage is too low, and no right to strike for many people. When the employers have all the advantages, what are working people to do? You really have to get in there, and maybe the rest of us have to get there and help these people fight for their ability to strike. I'm sure there's lots of other little things. I don't follow it really close anymore.

Q: When you were active in the union, you must've run into some anti-union activities or attitudes amongst your membership. Do you remember any of that amongst the workforce at Celanese?

WG: I guess I put bad things out of my mind. I'm sure there was, I just don't remember how they came across. Oh another one, Stan Stark was a union president for many years too. Some of these people have passed away since then, but they did lots for our union. He was another lab person that came out.

Q: What was the peak of productivity at Celanese, what period of time? When did you start to notice things winding down, and when did you start to hear rumours that Celanese was closing?

WG: Back in the late '70s they had shut down a couple of units, and then got the ability to put in the vinyl acetate unit. So that went in, that was an addition. Then they got the methanol plant, and that was in the early '80s. I must tell you a story about methanol in the early '80s. We had a delegation from South Africa here. It was probably in February; so you know Edmonton in February. Up on the 4th floor of the methanol reformer was quite cold. I was on the executive and was with these people touring the plant while they were here. We're way up here and the wind's blowing from the northwest and we're standing out there. I say to this black man, when it's cold like this we just all stand really close together to keep warm. I'm sure this poor black man had horrors the white woman would tell him to stand really close to keep warm. I'm sure I shocked him. But anyway,

those were some of the good days, and methanol was running good. It all sort of gets lost in life, doesn't it? . . . They started in late 1990s, and in 2000 they started. Some of the very first people to receive a layoff package were 3 lab technicians. Three senior women got their 2 weeks per year layoff package, and got to go on retirement in 2000. So that was a benefit to them, and that's really when the layoffs hit us. At that same time they were putting us all back, we all went back onto shift. The lab had been reduced in staff. The units, let's see, when did PE go down? PE continued for a while, but they were cutting back a little bit and things were going down. It was the first of March in 2000 when they put all the lab technicians back on 12 hour shifts. So after spending 35 years on days working weekends, to go back onto 12 hour shifts, then within a year or 2 doing hard physical work, was very difficult for me. Though at the point I just carried on and did what we had to do. But I have to say, I had some good bosses over the years. I'll probably have tears, so be patient with me. My daughter had arthritis her whole life, and my boss was wonderful. He would let me leave at 3 o'clock to go and get her from physio 3 times a week. I don't know how I would've managed without that. I had a wonderful boss at another point. I'd been at a roast for Ray Martin. I came home and there were messages on my machine. My husband worked on the road at that time. It turned out it was Fort St. John General Hospital intensive care. I phoned my boss at quarter to twelve and said, I'm taking a week's holidays next weeks, my husband's in the hospital in Fort St. John and I was flying up. So that was fine. These people are wonderful. Then in 2001 when I'm on 12 hour shifts I worked Tuesday night and I was sleeping during the day. My daughter phoned, and my son-in-law had committed suicide. I didn't go back to work for 6 weeks, and they were wonderful to me. There was another girl who was trying to take advantage of the system, and they harassed her. But I never had one question or

anything. I was off work for 6 weeks to help my daughter. So there's lots of good things that happened at Celanese and some wonderful people there.

Q: Then what happened in the 2000s?

WG: There was always things are going down, cutting back. Of course everything was made much more difficult. There weren't extra people to do work, and repairs were cut back. Things happened. I was fortunate. They had different layoffs and people were offered, sometimes people were targeted specifically and offered layoff. Other times it was put out and you could apply if you wanted. At the point where I went out, I was very, very fortunate in that they gave us an extra amount of money, plus our retirement benefit. I'm getting older at this point, and I would've been 60 that year. So I took it. You knew the plant was going down. But at the end when you saw the people, so many of them were so unhappy. I felt so sad for them. No morale, the morale was absolutely nothing. I think they had to work hard. They knew there was no future; they knew they didn't have a job within a year or two. But they couldn't afford to quit, because then they would lose their layoff pay. So it made it hard. I don't know how the bosses were at the end. I know that people I talked to were never happy. They found it very difficult. When you leave, you lose track of what's happening.

Q: It was many people's lives, wasn't it?

WG: Ya, all of us in the lab. Many of us were there from when we graduated until the end. We spent hours. They were our friends too, because you become friends. It was the

only place we worked. I can list off several people to you that literally it was almost the only place they worked. I did my training and left the hospital and went right to Celanese, and that was one job, 40 years almost. Another fellow retired on his 40th year; he was a staff member. But other people, some came and went a little bit. There were several people that came back to Celanese and quit, came back and quit. But they came back again. There was lots of family in that part of it.

Q: What was it like for you personally? What kind of adjustment did you have to go through? Even though your leaving was relatively pleasant, there was still a bit of adjustment. It was a new life, in a way. How did life change for you as a result of being laid off, retirement ...?

WG: At first I saw some of the people at Celanese a bit. But lately I've run into a new life. I go to the seniors' center. My daughter, because she is a widow and now has an 8 year old – Colin was only 26 months when her husband died – she's also handicapped and off on disability also. So my life is really centered around my family, because I do lots for her. We assist her in getting groceries, laundry, little things. Physical things are difficult for her. So that's my retirement life. That and a little bit of my seniors' and my church activities. I'm here to help where I can. You can make a good life for yourself after.

Q: Why did Celanese shut down?

WG: As far as I'm concerned, I think Celanese shut down because of free trade and the U.S. buying it out. We were just a little plant in the sticks, in the boondocks, and you're gonna shut down Texas or you're gonna shut down Edmonton. Well what's your choice? You shut down Edmonton. The PE unit made products we could make in Edmonton, but they shut it down anyway; that didn't matter. Vinyl acetate, they shut it down. And they would ship vinyl acetate up from Texas to Edmonton. We'd load it in tank trucks out of the tank cars to go to AT Plastics just down the road. Part of the Edmonton problem was also transportation. One day I saw a bill for a tank car of methanol. I think it was \$3,000 for methanol and \$5,000 for shipping. That's a big problem too. But I really feel U.S. buyout was our end.

Q: And how are we the losers? What have we lost?

WG: Jobs, jobs, lots of jobs. The ability to manufacture these chemicals and have them available for customers here in Alberta. Instead of shipping all of our raw resources out of the province, we should be manufacturing them and then shipping them. Let's do it here. I'm sorry, but I don't understand all this cattle stuff. Why do we ship our beef to Japan and the U.S., and then bring it in from Australia? Let's eat our own Alberta beef. All this stuff. There's so much more. Let's get more of it here at home instead of shipping things everywhere.

Q: How did your union handle all of this? What role did your union play?

WG: I don't remember much about that. I remember discussing free trade very much, and I don't remember what all we did. It was certainly high on the discussion levels. I'm sure we had petitions and things. I don't know what other levels we got into. I'm sure as a national union, I'm sure there was much, much more there. But down at Celanese itself, I don't remember.

Q: How did the union handle cases of people who were being laid off?

WG: I know the local union office for several years had one of the fibers people in there working, just assisting people looking at new career paths and information and stuff like that. I don't know who gave them, but the people at the end got funding to go for classes and things. I don't know any of the requirements of what they were allowed to take. It was a way of helping, but I wasn't in that so I'm not sure how much went on.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

WG: I guess I have to say on the whole it was a good work experience. If I spent almost 40 years, you had to look at what you get. Your job, I had good pay, good vacation. That was another thing we fought for, was vacation and days off. The ability to take time off, that part counts in a job. Like I said about my bosses that gave me time off for family and things. When the tornado went through Edmonton, I think there were 5 people that got a full week off work with pay. Some of them lost their houses. So there were lots of good things, and of course we were all happy to see that. Our students nowadays have to

understand more about labour, and the ability to work together and not just be a me generation.

[END]