

ALHI

Lorne & Agnes Wiley

LW: When graduated from the University of Alberta I looked for a job in the province. I had an Industrial Arts degree. So I was interested in technical schools and that sort of thing. Medicine Hat had just passed a plebiscite that they were going to build a new high school with at least four shop areas. So that looked like a good place to come. Besides that, my wife Agnes was teaching for the rural area here the year before that; so that was another drawing card.

AW: We both applied for a job in the city then.

Q: What year was that?

LW: That was 1952. We were just married.

AW: My home was just northeast of here, and I applied for a job in this area and got a job in the rural district the first year I taught. I had a sister in Medicine Hat. Then we both applied to come into the city, the year we were married. We've been here ever since.

Q: Did you continue teaching?

AW: Not very long. Our son was born in '54 and I quit teaching after that.

Q: What sort of community was it here in the '50s?

LW: There were only about 18,000 people in Medicine Hat; so it was quite a small city. The high school that I was coming to was the biggest high school and really the only high school in Medicine Hat. The first year I worked here I worked for \$2,700 a year. That was my pay. She got less.

AW: My paycheque was \$199 take home a month. But I was only a one-year trainee.

LW: I did not yet have my degree. I was just one course off my degree. I got involved with the veterans that came back, and they piled on courses. They wanted to know everything about everything. We were going to classes for 36 hours a week. We ate lunch during class time. Those boys really wanted to learn everything there was to learn.

Q: You were teaching then?

LW: No, that was at university, with these veterans that had just come back.

Q: Explain that program a bit.

LW: This was in Calgary. The Industrial Arts area appealed to a lot of those fellows because a lot of them had some technical training in the army and air force. There was quite a contingency of them. There was only two of us that were right out of high school. We were young and they had lots of experience. They picked professors' brains right and left all the time and kept him on his toes. The first year was okay; the second year it got loaded up. The third year is when we came in, Ken Elstead and myself, from high school. By this time they had that program so loaded that nobody passed without dropping at least one course. We had to have as many Arts options as the regular B.Ed people, and then we had all these technical labs to go to. So they were just night and day.

Q: What sort of fellows were these?

LW: They'd all been in the armed forces and they had various experiences. Some were in the air force and had been shot down even. But they were a good bunch to be around, because they had social skills. They took part in the university quite well. One of them became president of the students' union. They really got right into the university.

Q: What sort of community did you find when you came to Medicine Hat?

AW: Our milk was delivered by horse and wagon, which was interesting. There were no apartments to be found. We had to rent a place to live, and we lived in the upstairs suite of a house. We came to a two-room apartment in a basement that the doors came up to

here on Lorne. We stayed there one month. There was nothing to be had. Housing was really quite a problem.

Q: Why was that?

LW: It was kind of a boom time. It was right after the war.

AW: To tell you the truth, I was just new in teaching and I was so involved in that, that that took up all my time. I don't think I was really aware of some of the problems.

LW: It was a booming town. Housing was going great and even that new high school was a big project.

Q: What was driving the boom?

LW: There was a lot of industry in Medicine Hat. There was the glass plant at Redcliffe, brick and tile. Medalta, Alberta Clay--they made insulators for power lines all the way across Canada. CPR was big here; it was a division point on the CPR. They had a round house here. So that was another pretty big union, the CPR union.

AW: When they built the new school, they put a lot of money into schools because science became very important. Russia had been developing the Sputnik; so they started putting money into education. The school they built was a beautiful high school.

LW: It was Medicine Hat High School, and it's still there, still operating, on 7<sup>th</sup> Street Southeast.

Q: What do you remember about the conditions of schools in those days when you were teaching in the rural area?

AW: The rural area hadn't developed very much. It was still a one-room school with limited library, limited everything. There really wasn't a lot to go on.

Q: Who was your employer?

AW: Number 4, Medicine Hat School District #4. I had a problem with a little girl in grade 2, I'm sure now she was dyslexic. She was not reading. I got her in grade 2 and she hadn't learned to read in grade 1. I had no help with her in the fact that the superintendent came out and said, 'oh you're doing fine.' I told him about my problem and I had no help with her; so there wasn't a lot of support.

Q: Describe the one-room school.

AW: The people that lived quite close to the school came in in the winter and got the fires going and heated the school. They also cleaned the school. But it was difficult, because you had grade 1, grade 2, grade 3, 4, grade 7. I only had 9 students, which

doesn't make for a good social thing for them to develop socially. But that's what they had. It was very basic.

LW: She was the last teacher at that school.

AW: Yes, it closed. Willow Lake School District--I've forgotten the number.

Q: What do you remember about teaching conditions when you first started teaching?

LW: Well they were good. We built the Industrial Arts section of that school first. We were on the ground floor there. We operated about 60 grade 10s and about 20 or 30 in grade 11. Then by grade 12 it dropped off; we had 6 or 8. I was in the automotive section at the time. There was a metal section, an electricity section, and a wood section. We all got involved in drafting and some of the peripheral technical skills that we were supposed to be providing. The kids were good industrious kids, and we had fun. We enjoyed it. The fellows I was working with were all topnotch people.

Q: It was assumed that the industrial stream kids were inferior to the matriculation kids. Talk about that.

LW: I think because of the industry here and because it's a rural area, there was not much stigma attached to Industrial Arts areas. We felt that. There were the four teachers, but one of the vice-principals was in the technical department. The whole community

supported that. There was a large German population and they were industrious working people. There was also, when we first came here, there was sort of an English elite group. The high school before that time was quite an elitist school, Alexander High School, and only the better kind of people went there. After you got to grade 9 you quit. This new high school was an opportunity for all those people. This community felt that and they got behind it. When the community is behind the school, the school goes. That's the way it was.

Q: Where did your students find employment?

LW: Well we worked with the community on that too. We provided interviews every June to try and get the kids a job. The community was very supportive. The fellow that lived just across the road from here took a short course in drafting from me. He was very neat, very clean. I think you should get a job in drafting. He'd never thought of that really. So when he was in grade 11 he worked with Brown and Co., who were a big survey company in Medicine Hat, the biggest, and he got a job with them for the summer. He ever even came back for grade 12. He worked there with them until he retired.

Q: Teachers can mould their students. Did you feel that when you were teaching?

AW: After I came in from the rural district and came in to grade 2, they were great kids. They had just learned to read, very basic work. I don't think I felt that really. They were too young, they were still just in their development. But yes, part of their development.

Q: You never returned to teaching after you had the children, right?

AW: Right. After Jane was born, she was our youngest, I did try to go into substitute teaching for a while but I found that just ridiculous. They had gone into team teaching. They'd go into these large classrooms and it was noisy. It had moved from the students being well behaved to a little less well behaved. It was really difficult for me as a substitute teacher. I didn't last very long. I said, okay, that's it. But Lorne, I want you to talk about the program you had, the trades and service program.

LW: They were the people that had some disadvantage in the academic program. We worked with them too and we got them jobs within the community. The community was very supportive of them.

Q: How did you address their shortcomings?

LW: We set up special classes for them in reading and math. Some of those courses I took myself too. When I moved up to head of the technical department, I took some of those courses myself too. I found people that could not do math because basically they didn't even understand counting. Once they realized that it's just a matter of counting, that you've got 10 fingers, they could actually do math. Some of them had come all the way through the school system and never really picked that up. It was the same with reading. We had reading specialists there and they'd work with them, and sure enough

they could learn to read. Some of them couldn't. Some of them really made a contribution to the community and got permanent jobs. Some of them are still working.

Q: What was the state of the teacher's association back in those days?

AW: They didn't have a grid. They were paying people here and there. That got changed.

LW: There was actually a grid, but the women were on a different grid than the men.

AW: That's right. The women were on a different grid than the men.

LW: And elementary schools were on a different grid than high schools. It was right during the '50s that that got changed. We were talking for a single salary schedule for everyone.

Q: How did it get changed?

LW: Through the ATA. We were Local No. 1 was Medicine Hat, so we were a mover on that. Eric Angley was the general secretary of the ATA at the time, and he actually was a Medicine Hat man himself. His sister worked with me in Medicine Hat for years. So Medicine Hat was one of the first to get a single salary schedule. Then we were quite active, we worked well with the board, and the board pushed and we got a raise in salary. I could've gone out as a carpenter and earned more than I could as a teacher. I had been a

carpenter too. So the board saw that and said, well look, you work for us during the summer and we'll pay you trade wages. So we built bike racks, we built... The technical ones were the head push on it, but they got teachers from other areas too. They gave them jobs too, from the elementary schools, like vice-principals and so on. Summer work with the board. That helped to cover the wages.

Q: But weren't we already getting paid for the summer?

LW: Ya, but our board felt that, they could see that, well we went to them and said, we can make more. The sheet metal man and a machinist and a finishing carpenter doing woodwork. As a mechanic or as a carpenter I could make way more. So they realized that, and they did that for about two or three years there. Then they came through with some more money. This community didn't complain that much about school taxes. The local taxes went up and they could afford to pay teachers considerably more. So by 1956 or '57 I was getting just about twice as much as when I started. ... Initially I wasn't that involved with the ATA but in later years I became president of the sub-local and of the local. I went to ARA [ALHI note: Annual Representative Assembly] for years.

Q: Tell me about some of the changes you saw over the years.

LW: Medicine Hat High School went from being an elitist kind of school to a real public community school.

AW: But then it went back, Lorne.

LW: Not until just recently though.

AW: Twenty years ago.

LW: Not until the '70s, ya.

AW: They lost the vocational school. They quit teaching hairdressing and then they quit teaching cooking and then they quit teaching machine shop, then they quit teaching automotive, and all of a sudden there was no vocational school left. It became an academic school again. Now they may have a few but it's taken over by the college.

LW: But that's at a higher age level, 18 or over. This was all from 15 to 18.

Q: Why did they phase out the vocational training?

LW: It was too expensive. That program that I mentioned about trades and service, those people, that was very expensive. We had classes of 6 or 8 people with a teacher. I was teaching some of it and I was already at the top of the salary schedule. That's pretty expensive per student. So when the grant structure changed for student grants and things, these kind of programs became very expensive. So it was as much a matter of economics as anything. Then they changed administration too. Administration came in with high

ideals, different ideals. They were going to put Medicine Hat High School on the map as one of the leading high schools of the province, send more to university than any other high school, and so on. Of course it didn't work. They never did really. The dropout rate increased; that's all that happened.

Q: Where did these kids go then?

LW: Some of them got picked up by the college. They got jobs in the service areas, working in restaurants. But when they weren't successful in school they would move out. There were other high schools opening up by that time; so they would shop from one school to the other.

Q: When did the province change to a per student grant structure? Then they changed to school-based budgeting, didn't they?

LW: School-based budgeting is quite recent. That's after I retired. It was just coming in when I retired in '83.

Q: But when did it change to the per student?

LW: That was in the early '70s. There was also the educational taxes collected by communities went into the big fund about the same time. ... The school taxes the communities collected were spent locally. The taxpayers could see the results of their

taxes. There were mechanisms possible to have a plebiscite on school taxes but Medicine Hat never needed that, because the schools were well supported. But then the province started taking; I think their thinking was equalization across the province. That's the excuse they used. They would take all the taxes collected locally, put them in a fund, then they would distribute them back per student. The community all of a sudden starts to see that their money goes to the province, and then they have to beg it back. So they're not so willing to pay school taxes. They don't have the control over it.

Q: Did you notice that we stopped supplying the students and demanded that the parents supply them more?

LW: Ya. We used to use a book rental program, and even the supplies in the technical department. If it was something that the student was definitely going to take home and he could pay for the materials, that was okay. But there was always gray areas there, where kids didn't have the money or this sort of thing. The secretary treasurer of Medicine Hat district was George Davidson, and he was a very fair-minded, logical kind of fellow. When you took your books from your shop in to him and explained, well this is going to cost this much more than what it should, he'd say that's good. Medicine Hat didn't have a superintendent at that time. The principals and George Davidson ran the system.

AW: He was very good at the helm.

LW: He hired her; he hired me too.

AW: He was very fair, an amazing person.

Q: Describe how you became active in the ATA?

LW: You show that you're interested in salary and ATA things. First you represent your school and go to the meetings. If you go regularly and contribute a bit once in a while, first thing you know you're on the executive, then first thing you know you're a president after you've moved up the line. Then if you're on the sub-local, you're a logical candidate for the president of the local. So you move up the line. As president of the local, your influence will be considerable. You go to the Banff School for Teachers, and I worked on the hiring committee too with the school board. That would be in the '60s.

Q: Do you remember any developments from those years when you were president of the local and active in the ATA?

LW: We felt that the ATA was very strong. You know what happened too, and that was when we lost our funding, when the province didn't match our fees. That was a critical point and teachers are still suffering from that. That's when the funded liability started to go, and that's a critical problem right now today. I remember arguing against that. But the provincial government are just going to match the payout so it's all right. I questioned that all along the line and others did too. This doesn't look like good investment procedures, to rely on somebody else to come through with your pension.

Q: Do you remember anything from those years?

AW: No I don't, other than what I heard about from Lorne.

LW: I can't remember who was the general secretary. Bernie Keeler came in after that, and I don't think he'd have ever let it happen.

Q: I want you to think about your relationship to the NDP and the CCF before that. When did you first become involved with that party?

AW: I probably became involved because my father was a good CCF supporter. He used to talk politics. He was a charter member of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; so it all developed. I'd read about it, about the different political parties, and it was the natural thing for me to join the NDP. That's when I started becoming active. I shouldn't say that. I started becoming active when Jane was 6, our youngest daughter was about 5 or 6. She started going out delivering pamphlets with me when she was about 5. She was born in '68. ... Trudeau was here, came to Medicine Hat and spoke in the park. We had picket signs and he made some sarcastic comment about the New Democrats back in that corner, or something.

Q: What values did your father give you?

AW: That people should have opportunities. He talked a lot about Tommy Douglas and that it's important to be your brother's keeper. Tommy Douglas was just a sacred name in our household.

Q: Did you ever see Tommy Douglas yourself?

AW: Oh ya, he came to Medicine Hat. He came to the high school and just filled the place. An amazing person and an amazing speaker. Both Lorne and I were at the last convention where he gave his retirement, in Regina. He spoke and we didn't let him sit down. He wasn't very well by that time; he was already sick. We kept him up for over half an hour, the applause.

Q: When can you remember first getting involved, and why did you get involved?

LW: My mother was a teacher and she was a life member of the CCF and NDP. She became a left member, so she was a long-term supporter. She really thought the golden rule should apply to all phases of life, including politics. She was a strong influence on me in that respect.

Q: How was the NDP received in this community?

AW: There were a lot of people quite actively involved. We never got very far but we just kept trying.

LW: We ran second a time or two in elections.

Q: Who was running when you ran second?

AW: The last time we would've run second, but the Green Party cut us out. If we'd have got the votes that went to the Green Party, we would've been.

Q: Who were the NDP leaders who did the best around here?

LW: There was Lewis Toole of course.

AW: He ran provincially and federally. I ran at one point in time, the year the election was called when Joe Clark had lost and called an election within 4 months, and we had that February election. It was called right around Xmas.

Q: What do you remember about that campaign?

AW: I ran against Bert Hargrave and there was a Social Credit candidate. I don't think there was a Liberal candidate at that time.

LW: Oh sure there was. Olson.

AW: Oh Bud Olson of course. Very polished by this time, he was. It was just an exciting time and it was very exciting for me because I took all my energy to run and get up there and speak in front of people. We didn't fare that well.

Q: How big was this constituency then?

AW: It was before it got enlarged, but it still included out to Empress, Brooks, down south to the American border, a big area.

Q: Where did you do well and where did you do not so well?

AW: I think Redcliffe was where we had a lot of support. Brooks no, a very conservative town.

Q: What was your involvement with the NDP?

LW: I'd always worked on local campaigns, pounded pavement over the years.

AW: Then both of us tried to become a little more inactive, thinking we'd retire and let some younger people move in. But it never happened. So we're back in trying to help. The young people aren't coming in.

Q: Why is it not happening?

AW: Well the young people apparently are just turned off politically. I don't know what caused it really, but something did. They don't go out and vote. Yet there still are young committed people and we still have some that support what the NDP stands for and are very strong there. But they're fewer in numbers.

LW: And the unions are not as strong as they were in this area. When we had strong union people involved with the NDP, they didn't bring all the union group but they brought a fair contingent of it, a fair amount of it. Like the glass plant in Redcliffe, that's where Agnes got a lot of votes, from those labour people at Redcliffe like Eldon Fischer and ...

AW: Another reason I think is if people do not read the alternate press at all they don't understand what's happening. If they just watch the news and read the local newspaper, there isn't a lot there for them to find out what is really happening.

Q: What advantages does this place have for industry?

LW: This is where natural gas first came out. This is why Kipling came to Medicine Hat and said Medicine Hat is the town all ? for a basement. They blew off a gas statement down by the railway station as he went through, for his benefit. So that's a local story. Energy through natural gas, that's a big pusher for industry. Our glass plant industry, our clay industries, they're all energy demanding. So is the fertilizer industry and the

greenhouse industry. We've got big greenhouse industry, especially in Redcliffe. Redcliffe is a greenhouse town. I forget how many acres they have under glass in Redcliffe. That is because of natural gas, because they have to heat those things. And of course Medicine Hat has a big advantage because we have more sunshine than any other place in Alberta. We don't get the Lethbridge winds in a big way, but we do get pretty nice chinooks. Medicine Hat owns its own gas utility. We're in competition Encana now to get fields of gas. We were bringing gas in from as far as Saskatchewan. Encana wants to-- right out here in our back yard-- drill 2500 gas wells. They're shipping it down south. A 30-inch line goes just west of town here. It starts at about Hassar and that's where TransCanada Pipeline and their lines cross. The gas is going south. They're in Colorado and California. I think it's mostly used for ? production down there, but I'm not sure.

Q: What happened then to these industries?

LW: The glass plant was one of the biggest ones to close down first. It was owned by Desmarais in Montreal and he could care less what this community did with the glass plant, and he sold it to Canadian Air company. So what did they do? They ran it for a while, there was too much complaint, and air started to be put in cans. Then plastic came in and glass containers are just ?? The plant still operates making fiberglass. But it's all automated, very few employees. The glass plant was much more labour intensive at that time. They had automated blowing machines and that sort of thing, but there was a fair contingent of labour. The brick and tile, I-XL, they're going strong and they're one of our success stories. But there again what's happened to that union is that they have automated

brickmaking machines. They go through that plant and nobody touches those bricks and they're pushed on the truck, automatic palleting. The bricks come out of there and they're automatically palleted, they go on the big truck and away they go. They just recently closed a brick plant in Redcliffe.

Q: What happened to Medalta?

LW: During the war Medalta was going great. They were a big ceramic supplier to the CPR, the hotels across Canada, and so on. But after the war they lost a lot of those contracts to overseas and so on. They just weren't making enough money to stay in business, I guess. I don't know.

AW: They had a big fire, and to restore was too costly for them to do this. The competition too, from the mass production that was happening.

LW: It was a labour-intensive plant too. That stuff was hand-painted. There was a big group of people doing nothing but painting. Another group working the kiln, and that made that plant quite inefficient when automation came in and automatic production plants started. Well do you build a new plant here with automatic, or just close it down? You just close it down.

Q: What remains of the industry?

LW: The fertilizer industry, that's kind of a latecomer into this area, but it was big. It was Northwest Nitro's first big fertilizer plant in western Canada. Well no, Calgary had one, that was Alfred brand, Cominco owned. This one, Northwest, was a private outfit. They had branches in the US too. They came in here and they built a plant here. They used French equipment to build the plant, and my understanding is it had a life expectancy of 5 years. So the maintenance of that plant just went up after 5 years, and by that time Northwest Nitro sold it to the pool. The pool found out that they can't keep it going. Fertilizer is very corrosive stuff and the plant was falling apart. So then they built this new plant, and this new plant is still operating. But then again, each time they rebuild the plant the more automated it becomes. People instead of walking around checking this and this, they sit at a panel and it all gets checked from there, one man.

Q: So what else remains?

LW: There's a carbon black plant. It's non-union. It's owned by Transalta. It wasn't initially but it is now. They make high-grade carbon black, suitable for plastic industry, not just for tires.

Q: What about the greenhouses?

LW: They're private-owned and they have their own co-op for wholesaling, the Red Hat Co-op.

AW: But they suffered when energy costs went up.

LW: The natural gas prices put pressure on them, too. But so far they have survived that.