

Myrna Wright , Pincher Creek, 2009

MW: I still live in Pincher Creek, Alberta, Canada. I've been married for 42 years and have a family of one son and a daughter and two little grandsons and a son-in-law. I went into nursing in 1967, which was 42 years in February. The only reason I went into nursing was because I couldn't get into hairdressing and I had \$50 that I won as a scholarship from school and I had to do something with it. So I picked nursing because that was the only other one I could go into without having to be an RN, because I hate giving needles. Guess what I do today? So anyway, I went into nursing in '67, went to Calgary to the School of Nursing there, took a 10-month course, did all my practicum in the General Hospital in Calgary. Came home to Pincher Creek, got married three days after graduating from school, and started work immediately. I never even went to an interview, had to make a resume, nothing. I went to see the Sisters and they said, can you start today? I said, no, in a week I'm getting married. They said, okay. So I came back, went to work, and I'll tell you it was the change of my life. In Calgary we had so many things that Pincher Creek never had. We had to make our own 4x4s, Q Tips, shake the thermometers down. It was so different from in Calgary. I'm still there. We changed hospitals in 1983 to the new hospital in Pincher Creek. I'm still working on nightshifts. I've worked nights most of my 42 years. I think 38 years of it has been nights. But how I got to be in the union was in March of '67 I was taken to a union meeting. But it wasn't called a union then; we were an association. They needed someone to look after the Pincher Creek site because we were together with Fort McLeod and the Crows Nest Pass. They said, Myrna, it's not a hard job, we will help you if you will be the president of the site. Oh, I guess I could do it. So from that day until--I was only two years of my 42 years that I was not chair of the Pincher Creek site--and then I was treasurer. But I've always held a very active part in the union all my life. The only reason I went into it is I feel that everyone has to be treated fair and that we should know what's going on. The Sisters had a way of not telling us everything. The very first time I tried to have a vacation after working there for a year, the Sister told me I couldn't have one. I went to a meeting in January in Calgary with the Alberta Hospital Association, and I found out that our pay

stubs were not right, and we got retro pay because of that. Then I kept calling up the Alberta Hospital Association to ask them all these questions. In 1975 when I was much pregnant with my daughter, I went before the labour board and got a certificate for Pincher Creek. Up until that time we had only been under voluntary rec, and we did not get represented at the table at the time because we were voluntary rec. So I got a certificate for our worksite, which was very good because then the Sisters had to abide by the rules. They could not bend them in any way, because it was a signed contract at that time. From there, you know what I've done from there.

Q: Was your family involved in the union?

MW: My family were farmers. No, nothing. My dad always believed in you got paid for what you got and that you never told a lie. As I was telling the kids downstairs, you got two chances and the third time you got shot, because that's what we used to do to the cattle. I never wanted to be shot. So you did it in the first two chances because you didn't get a third. But no, my family had nothing to do with it. But my family, my son, because he heard so much unionism, when he went to United Airlines, there was no union there. He was 24 years old and he decided that they needed a union. He brought in the union for them. There are 80 some people there and he's the only steward on site. He's been to the bargaining table twice and he believes in the same philosophies as his mother. When he had to have duty to accommodate two summers ago, we went to the government. He's notorious for phoning the labour board, because that's what I tell him to do. Failure to represent: if they don't do what they're supposed to do, he phones the labour board and asks them questions and then they phone the employer and say, you know you've got to do this because this is the way it is. So he's learned lots and his mentor is his mother. But through the years I've mentored a lot of people who have come up through the ranks, like Susan Slade and Sharon Savage. They've all been underneath me. The kids who've ever been in the Pincher Creek chapter and leave are always active in the chapters they go to. I must have something that they like about the union when they see it.

Q: What's the difference between a union and an association?

MW: The association, as we saw it before we let go of the political side of us, which was the LPNs. We let them go and become the college. Then we became the union. Under that you really don't feel like you fight for people as much. The union, you are the union and you care for it. Under the association, people will say, but you're only an association. You don't feel the same fight. We would never have struck under the association like you do under the union. You believe in something very strongly. You have the camaraderie and all that under the association, but you're much stronger as a union.

Q: Do you notice a difference now working with the Sisters?

MW: I don't know, because we're no longer Catholic. We went from the Catholic. In the '70s we turned into a municipal hospital. But I know that working with the Sisters, they had good things and they were good to us in many ways. But in other ways, like at Christmas after they left us, we found out, oh my God we have tons of boxes of chocolates at Christmastime, which we never knew we had before. And we didn't have to skimp on everything. If we wanted equipment, we got equipment; we didn't have to beg, borrow, and steal. And the feeling that if you weren't Catholic you weren't as good as the Catholic staff members. We were always made to feel as if... We stayed behind on Sunday from 10 until noon while the Catholics got to go to church, but we could never go to church. That was not right. When we first started, we had lots of fun with the Sisters. We used to put wine in our cups on Christmas and New Years and they never knew it. We had lots of fun, lots of fun. What else do you want to know?

Q: What impacted you the most to make you become such a strong proponent of human rights?

MW: My goal in life was, I always said when I got to be on a negotiating team, that would be the ultimate, I would've won what I really wanted. I wanted to see how you negotiated the contract and how come we couldn't get what we wanted to get. Well that started in 1984 and I'm still on the negotiating team for the union. You gain some years

but you still got always more to gain and you want to see the finish of some things that you started. In 1976 when I first went on any kind of a team, that was when we did the equal pay. The orderlies were paid more money than the girls were, and that was so unfair. We won it that year. I always remember how that impacted me to think, we did it. We did it, not as a union, but the girls from Edmonton, it was a lot Edmonton-driven – the Royal Alec and ACNA. We won it and they never thought that we'd win it, and we did win it. I always remember getting over \$1,000 back pay. I thought, oh my God, because in those days that was a lot of money. From that day forward we still keep on fighting and we still want equity of pay, but we still haven't got there yet.

Through being on the negotiating team I met some wonderful lawyers. Through them I have taken up different battles outside of being on the team. I fought the EUB against a pipeline that was going through my land. I held out until the very last minute. That was about 1995, '96. I decided that I did not want the pipeline. I got different people's opinions and I fought them to the very end. They had to pay me what I wanted in order to get the pipeline. I was the last person on the pipeline to sign and I had lots of names. But at the end of the day I didn't have to do what they wanted me to do, they did what I wanted to do and they did it right. They lied to me. I even had a landman. I had a landman that I had to get a court order to cease and desist against him, because he would come to my house at 2 o'clock in the morning, 7 o'clock, and phone me all hours of the night. They harassed me, they did lots of things to me to get me to sign to put that pipeline through. But Bill Johnson, who we use, he told me I didn't have to do that. I stuck to my guns and I was a strong little girl. I learned that you don't give up if you truly believe in what you believe in, you keep on going. And I did. And I was on FCSS, Family Community Support System, for years and years in the community. That's somewhere where you get government money and you give it out to all these organizations. At first it was easy. We didn't have enough organizations to give all this money to. It was over \$150,000 and for the little town of Pincher Creek that was a lot of money. We were giving to anybody who came to the door that wanted money. One of the things we gave to was the outreach, which was a Christian outreach where they had clothes and a soup kitchen and stuff. We found out later on that we couldn't do that. Then we had to go out and find people. Now they've got so many people at the FCSS, they

don't have enough money. We looked after the seniors, the children; we looked after everybody in the community. That was a great learning tool for me. I gave a lot of people a little bit of learning too on how unions were. They were so downcast on us. During the strike of 2000 I was on that committee, and afterwards they were very proud of me. When I came home they were very proud that they'd seen me on TV and they believed we should've got what we got. So you change people's view of the community by being on different things.

Q: What was your motivation for that strike?

MW: I believed in what we were doing. It was the team we were on, our negotiator, and the fact that we'd been so underpaid and so many years had been promised the other half of the loaf of bread, and we never got it. We deserved it. When you saw what the RNs got, what they gave us, you can't go back and tell your people to take it, because it's not worth it. It wasn't worth it and we were being discriminated against.

Q: What do you remember about the strike?

MW: Sitting long, long hours at the Inn on 7<sup>th</sup> with Sandy and watching the lights on the AHA building. When the lights went out we knew they were gone to bed. Sometimes they were lying because they'd leave us up all night while they had gone home to bed. We'd be sitting at the table waiting for them to come back, when they never came back until morning. It was a long time, seven days that we never slept. Well we slept off and on. But the day that we went to bed, in the morning, remember that Sandy? We went to bed at 10 o'clock. She climbed in the other half of my bed. They called us back at 5 to 1 that they had a decision, and that was the most sleep we had got for three days.

Q: That was not in this part of town.

MW: No, Inn on 7<sup>th</sup>, downtown. They had huge big chairs, and every once in a while we'd go out and find Sandy in a huge chair, and her feet wouldn't even touch the ground.

Q: Who influenced you?

MW: I don't know; it's just me. I always want people to get what they rightfully deserve. I don't like bullies. As I went along, people like Pat Frederickson, who was one of the first presidents of ACNA, she led us on our trek along the way with the LPNs. But it was always being able to get what we deserved and what we should have, and not taking as the underdog.

Q: Did you do that as a child?

MW: I was a middle child and always had to fight for what I wanted. I had three sisters and I was the tomboy of the family. I was outside a lot and never did do any of the housework. I was always an outside person. A lady I was not. I grew up in a farming community. I played basketball. My mom was on all of the committees. She was very active in the church and in the community, and was usually chairing something. But I played basketball and did all those things. I was a bad little girl, I was the bad daughter. I got into trouble.

Q: Were there any particular problems you wanted to correct?

MW: It was just general, that why should we be given so much less than them when we did most of the work. It hasn't changed; it's getting worse.

Q: What changes have you seen over the years?

MW: I always said I'd quit work when it got to be \$20 an hour; well now I'm almost at \$30 and I'm still here. It's wonderful to get equal to what UNA has in so many ways, with shifts and weekends and that. We will be equal to them next year and we should've been equal to them all along. Why are we so different? What makes them so much better than us?

Q: What were the differences between ACNA and ??

MW: We were just growing up through the years.

Q: Were there any people who influenced you?

MW: There was Bobby; what's Bobby's last name? She was president for a long time. She was an English girl and she took on a lot of fights. When she wore red boots to work you knew somebody was going to get fired. And that's usually what happened. It's just through the system of being on the board and learning all the things that you have to be as a board member. It's a lot of work. You know right from wrong when you start hiring and firing people, which I did through the years. I hired Carl Soldstrom to the guild. I always say that you let your gut feeling rule you. Many times I did not, and it turned around that it was not a good decision. I always remember we were hiring for a position and this man from BC applied. I asked him one question, I always ask this question – how do you like working with almost all women? The union was almost 99% women; we don't have a lot of men. He said to me, I guess I'll have to put up with it. I thought, I don't like this man. I voted no, I did not want him. But it was three people, so if two out of three vote yes, he's hired. So one day we were in a board meeting and he hit me on the head with a book to shut me up. Well he was gone the next day. I said to them, I told you from the get-go that I did not like that man and that he did not respect us. He didn't; he had no respect for our people at all. So I learned. I do remember his name but I won't tell you. And Richard West, who works for UNA, I also hired him on at the guild. One day he got very mad at us and he left. Bobby said to me, he was in England, Myrna you have to fire Richard. I said to him, I can't. She said, but I told you you have to fire him. So I thought, well she's in England, she won't know. Then the next day things happened at the office as things do, and I had to hire Richard right back because we wouldn't have had any staff. So he never got the papers. So I saved Richard's job.

Q: Why was she in England?

MW: On holidays. And then I was supposed to be the president, being vice, and I took over running the guild. I always remember how a little yellow sticky cost us \$60,000. We had this little test, we had a little case before a lawyer. We maintained that we did not know anything about this. No, we were in the investigating meeting and we said, no we never knew anything about this. Somebody turned over the page and there was a yellow sticky. It cost us \$60,000 because right there it was written. We couldn't lie, we had to pay. Up until then everybody had said nobody knew anything about this. And there it was right there. That cost us \$60,000. I always say, no more yellow stickies anywhere, cuz that cost us big bucks.

Q: When you started there it was just a small place.

MW: Then it got to be very many, because wasn't it 21 or more at the end when we finished it off? We started with daycare and brought daycare into the system, and it didn't work out. Then we went community and that didn't work out. Margaret Nelson and I went out to see if the guild members wanted to belong to AUPE in the spring of 1998. Then in 1999 we became part of AUPE with a vote at the convention. November 19, 1999 we became part of AUPE. I've been very active in the union since then.

Q: Tell us about the problems with the merger.

MW: There were very many people who did not want to go to AUPE. It was mostly because of fear of losing our identity. But as it turned out, and now we know, Bill 27 would have put us under AUPE anyway, or UNA would've taken us over. There's only so much you can do. Some of the members did not want to go, but there were a lot that did want to go, because they could see that bigger is better, which is true, and that we would get far better deals at the bargaining table.

Q: What stood out most about that merger?



MW: My trip around the province. I went to see everyone with Margaret. And how they predicted that the north would be very unfriendly to us and that the south would be friendly to us, and it was the direct opposite. The south was totally against it and the north, outside of Westlock, was for it. There wasn't huge people who came out and were mad. We promised them that they would get their vote. If they came to convention they would get their vote and their say would go. It didn't matter what I said or you said; they said it. It was member-driven, not us, not the board. We didn't do it; they did it.

Q: Do you remember anything in particular about the road trips?

MW: In Lethbridge they wanted my head on a platter. But other than that, no.

Q: Did they ask a lot of questions?

MW: Oh yes, they were well attended meetings. Every one of them was well attended. People who were so angry about going, when we got into AUPE took positions and were totally opposite once they got here. It was interesting to see through the years how things have changed.

[ END ]