

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Doug and Evelyn [Eva] Tomlinson

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Dates: 2001

Location: Milner Library, Edmonton

Index: Introductions – Post World War II Reforms in Canada – Raging Grannies – Fighting for hotel unions in 1940s Alberta – Red-baiting in the 1950s – 1954 Hotel/Restaurant workers’ strike - Unification of the trade union movement (CIO/AFL) – Dave Werlin, AFL, Gainers Strike – Jan Lakeman, Railway unions – Alec Young, hotelmen union

My name is Doug Tomlinson. I’ve lived in Edmonton since 1946.

I’m Evelyn Tomlinson, his wife. I have lived in Edmonton since 1946. Before that I lived in southern Alberta. I was born in Cardston.

She came from a Mormon family that migrated from Utah in the early days. The Mormon bishop of Cardston married us. I was a Roman Catholic at that time and she was a Mormon.

They were fine; they were pretty good.

DT: I was born in Toronto in 1919. In 1929 my dad lost his job in Toronto and migrated to Montreal. I was raised in Montreal until the war years. When I got discharged in ’45 I met Evelyn. She was building bombers for aircraft in the 2nd world war. I was in the air force. We met and got married five days later. I don’t know what really happened.

Oh dear it wasn’t 5 days, it was over a month later.

DT: Yes I was. I worked in Vancouver. First I went to Calgary from Cardston. Then I went from Calgary to Vancouver. I worked for Boeing Aircraft. I even gave them an idea of how to stack the, we were doing the wings and I told them how to speed up. Take it out and let the riveters work over here and you drill. I never got any, my lead hand took the credit for it. But anyway I did it. It was fun. I was there when that pilot was run over by the plane. They were moving the plane and he stood like this and his cuff got caught and he was run over and killed. It was horrible. I don’t know too much. We came to Edmonton later, Doug and I. He worked in the hotels.

DT: Well during the war years I got involved with some good strong left wing guys. They smartened me up. When I came out in 1945, my generation didn’t want to see ten more years of a depression. We’d fought a terrible war and defeated fascism and we wanted Canada to be a good country. We’ve struggled ever since. I helped build the national health plan and other reforms. We’re still fighting today. It’s an honour to be with all

these younger Canadians here on the convention floor. I think there's a wonderful future in this country because of them.

ET: But I'm worried about the World Trade Organization. They seem to say that if they want something you have to give it to them or they will sue you. So it's scary, isn't it? I'm with the Raging Grannies. Seventeen years we've been. We have to keep fighting though, we can't give in. If we give in, we're lost. And the unions have to stick together too. And it's horrible what (?) has done. My son was the one that fought for him and now he doesn't even recognize Stan. He's a good boy. He went and demonstrated with his children at the staff picket line.

For a while we moved to Brooks Alberta and I joined the Calgary local. Grant McCarty was the business agent then and a grand guy. Then I moved to Edmonton, transferred up here.

Yes with the union. Hotel and Restaurant Employees. And I transferred when I came to this one, disaster took place up here.

DT: During the 1940s, a good strong left wing coalition organized this province. One of the most difficult industries to organize is the hotel and restaurant industry. They organized Banff, Jasper, Red Deer, Lethbridge, High River, Drumheller, Edmonton, two cities in the north, I forget their name. But we had a wonderful union. The trouble was we hired a business agent in Edmonton by the name of Joe Cherrington. Anyways, this was when the Cold War got really hot. They were expelling left wingers all across the country and the United States, expelling unions. This guy up here went into a rampage. In fact he reminded me of Goebbels. He'd work himself up into such a fury at union meetings.

Then he led the union into a strike, a disastrous strike. We lost seventeen hotels in Edmonton. The desk clerks, the chamber maids, the janitors, but not the cooks. But we had the strike, it lasted for five months. We went out in April and we went back into work in October. We lost the strike, and the company made us sign an agreement with no collective security at all. There we were, with the union busted, seven or eight hundred workers gone. From top to bottom in hotels. 1954. I was lucky and I got fired, I got put on trial in the union for being a Red. They removed me from the executive. I was very lucky that the manager of Montgomery Legion, which was the biggest legion in Canada at that time, he hired me. He was an old Welch coal miner. Tough, hard man. When the business agent tried to get me out of there he sat on the throne of the building. So I stayed there sixteen years as a bar tender. We tried to rebuild the union. The whole town had such a head start on us and such a disgraceful thing. Because the business agent that led us into this accepted bribes from two hotels in town to leave them open during the strike. It was a terrible scandal. And all that hard work during the 1940s that those people who built this very strong union it was, but it was destroyed on the basis of Red-baiting. Should be a lesson to everybody.

Yes, I knew Bill Longbridge very well.

Well the unification in the trade union movement, the CIO and AFL got together. I got credited in Edmonton for bringing the two groups together. They met in the old labour temple and one side was there the CIO over there like this you know. It was on the basis of my strike that it was on. I was told later that because they wouldn't even talk to each

other. But on the basis of my union it was so desperate they did come down. It kind of broke the ice.

'54, yes. Ya, and I got expelled form the Edmonton District Labour Council for being a Red. Carl Berg did it. Old Carl Berg, the reactionary.

Jack Dick, yes. He wasn't part of that kind of stuff. But the Red-baiting was so rampant. On television, on the radio, on movies. It was just terrible, just like fascists. You had nobody to turn to. Gordon Wright, an NDP lawyer, he was very good with me. He did what he could to help. Yes '50s, bad times.

The impossible job we had was to reorganize after we lost the strike. We lost hundreds of workers. They were blacklisted, it was terrible in this town. The Hotelman's Association and the rotten bunch that they are, they just held an iron grip. Any hotelman, I became an organizer. I organized - besides this hotel, I organized some others. But we couldn't get an agreement. They brought a lawyer by the name of Dave Ross in. As soon as we organized he'd come in there and dessimate the staff. The Board of Industrial Relations was useless. Was a rubber stamp for the hotelman. So no matter what we did, no matter how we struggled, and I put my wife and family through hell. I had 5 kids. We fought and organized and won and lost and lost and lost certifications. When we did get certified, couldn't get an agreement. There was no unity in the union. Oh they're a bunch of Reds you know, leave them on their own. They got their necks put in a sling too.

I would say there was. Suspicions. Then things began to change quite a bit.

I got elected 12 times.

I became an organizer when I was president too. Oh yes, I initiated the stop steward in our union. See, we have a section of our union in the north. In those big camps. We've got 3 or 4,000 members up there now in Syncrude and GCOS and all those new camps that are opening up. The entire cooking staff and the camp attendants are members of our union. And wages are very good, they do very, very good. They get good pay. We had to fight like hell to get women to work as beau cooks. Making the beds up, 40 units. We had an awful time getting the women in there. They finally got in and they did a good job. They were good union people. They come to union meetings.

There was a period again when Red-baiting went down. It wasn't used as somebody to keep themselves in power as we've witnessed here in the city. The Red-baiting was more subdued. That was a big thing. You could get up on the floor of a meeting and somebody yell at you, shut up Red. All kind of stupid things like that, you know. So that was very important for me anyways.

Yes, all the legion branches were organized. When I worked at the Montgomery Legion, we got the other branches all unionized. Then they went on the legion executives, they went on a splurge of Red-baiting. Quite vicious. Very tough.

We organized at the Edmonton Club. From that strike we had - we lost the strike, we couldn't get an agreement, a girl by the name of Joy Sennet. I got her at the south side legion as a waitress and she was a dandy. A real old fashioned union girl. The executive didn't like her. She was outspoken and she always wore a union button and got the staff to wear their union blue button. Anyway they fired her. I had Gordon Wright fight her case. He reinstated her and got her pay back. They never forgave us for that. We had a

manager there for a while, a very nice fellow. He got shot down over Berlin in the 2nd world war. He was a real good guy. He got hold of me and said, Doug, they're going to get the union out. He said, this is the worst collection of bastards you've ever seen in your life. He said, they don't want nothing to do with the union. So what they did when the collective agreement came up, they hired scabs. And ran the branch. The thing that saved them, they were losing money. And the Edmonton transit system had a building, no the legion bought a building very close to the south Strathcona. The ETS rented it and gave them 2 years rent in advance, \$120,000. After they got that money they were laughing. They could last forever. So we had to abandon the ???. Van, yes. They were good fighting girls. We didn't have the solidarity in the labour movement that we have today.

Sad times.

But to finalize for me, just to say Red-baiting. This is the most destructive force on the working class. It's the renegades that always resorted to Red-baiting. When they couldn't carry their point they started calling people Reds. It was a shame.

Well there was the war in Korea, the war in Vietnam. We took positions on that. Clear fighting positions of opposition to it. We got condemned for that by right-wing elements in the labour movement. Ah, you can't do this and you can't do that. We didn't back off. And our union is still fighting.

Well there were some outstanding Red-baiters at the Edmonton District Labour Council. I got elected 4 times as executive secretary of the Labour Council. But there were some outstanding Red-baiters there. I could name 3 or 4 unions that wherever they were, they were sickening. But the people were, I don't think they were aware. There were a lot of programs on TV. I was a communist for the FBI and things like that you know.

The climate was very close to me to a 3rd world war. I'm sure Americans were prepared for it.

Q: What about exemplary individuals in the Labour Movement?

DT: Art Roberts in Calgary: Coal miner. Little short guy with a big chest and voice and the right wing hated him and were scared of him. They were scared of him on the floor of a convention. CUPE. And Dave Werlin, good example, good fighting guy. When we walked the picket line with David at that stupid packing plant, Gainers packing plant - if it wasn't for Dave that one would've gone down the drain then. But Dave put up a real fight. He was president of the AFL. Him and I went east last summer and every labour council we went into from here to Halifax, big posters from Edmonton about the strike against Gainers. The AFL really did a job here.

There was an oldtimer by the name of Jan Lakeman. He was with the railway unions. When they brought in that reactionary labour act in Alberta, he's the guy that led the fight against it. Did a wonderful job, but they passed it anyways. Jan Lakeman, giant of a guy. He was an active Roman Catholic you know. A strong left winger. Of course good people we knew like Bill Tuomi who led the Communist Party here for 40 years. Salt of the earth, and a good relationship with everybody. Or there are lots of others, I can't think of them right now.

Q: Can you tell us the story about organizing the Chateau Lacombe?

DT: Well the [Chateau Lacombe] hotel was opening up. So I went to McDougall United Church there and I talked to the grand old minister. Yes, he says, you can have the basement. Bring them down, sign them up down here. So, they were building the hotel, the upper parts of it. Evelyn used to go up the stairways, walking up and down, way up to the top floor. Run in and sign up the chamber maid up and take off.

ET: No I didn't sign them up.

DT: That's right. You'd send them to me.

ET: 'Cause how could I sign them up? ... It was fun.

Interviewer: It sounds like a good strategy.

ET: Yeah. It was because nobody knew me. I mean the hotel people didn't know me, so going up and around and the girls would go down to the hotel – uh – er to the, oh – church.

DT: Church, yeah.

ET: And it was interesting and fun. I think I'd like organizing.

DT: When we were organizing chambermaids, Evelyn would take about 6 hats with her. She'd change her hat on the main floor and take the elevator up. Pretty soon, they'd get to know her by her hat. So she'd change her hats.

[wife tells undercover chambermaid story, dirty rooms]

DT: Could I mention one more man? Him and I eventually didn't get along together. Maybe I made more mistakes than he did, I don't know. But there was a man by the name of John Rawluk. He was the desk clerk in the York Hotel. He led the union at that time against Sheraton, and say what they could with the union. He's the guy that got the construction camps going for union. John Rawluk. Him and I had a falling out over what I suspected he was taking bribes, but I could never prove it. But I'm sorry about that, because he was a very good man. He stood up against Joe Sherington and saved what was left of the union.

Oh yes, financially it's a big thing. You should see the union offices they got now.

[wife disagrees]

Well we're very optimistic about the future. We're optimistic about the Canadian working class. They're young. The women and men, and especially the women, they're better educated today. They've got all kinds of resources of communications. They're changing the world. We feel good about it, those of us in the labour movement. We see the younger generation coming up, they're marvellous. We're very proud of them. We never stop telling them how good they are. ...remind me of the old days. They were giants. They were giants.

When I got into the labour movement as a left wing, I ran across some at conventions. The fisherman's union in B.C. The UE in Ontario. They were very rank and file unions. The people that fought the Steelworkers and people like that - disgraceful. Their behaviour was disgraceful. Contemptible. So it was a great experience for me to know those men. Because there was nothing before that. During the 1930s they organized. And

organized and fought. And built the labour movement in this country. It's got lots of good left wingers around in the NDP. They're great.

We had this organizer called Alec Young. The hotelman. He's Russian. He changed his name. Which he did. What an organizer, what an organizer. He went into the city of Calgary and organized all the hotels. Try and organize one hotel. He did it, he was a genius. But the time was right, the time was right you know. The war against fascism and tremendous upsurge of the people. And the war effort to support the United Nations. There was that general atmosphere. He took advantage of it and organized. Boy I'm telling you.

He could do anything and did everything. He used every device. Do you know how he organized Drumheller? They had 5 hotels down there, not one of them were organized. He went in and seen the miners in Drumheller, had a meeting with the miner's union, said I wanna organize the hotels. They told Alec, be here tomorrow morning. So he stayed in town overnight. Next morning there were about 100 miners there and they took their picks and went like that so the iron part fell on the ground. They walked down to the hotels and they surrounded the hotels. At dinnertime he signed them up, got a collective agreement for all hotel workers. They didn't even join the union. That's organization.

Miners are wonderful. What a wonderful history they have in this province. Something to be proud of.