

Wesley Mapp

Interviewers: Muriel Stanley-Venne and Don Bouzek

Q: Tell us about your early life.

WM: I was born in Athabasca, Alberta, July 15th 1945. I was raised in Amber Valley, Alberta. What's the next question?

Q: Tell me about Amber Valley and how you remember your first home. Part of that would be what kind of education you got and also about the culture of Amber Valley.

WM: Amber Valley was predominantly a black community. Culture, farming was our main culture there. Baseball was one of the big sports.

Q: There was competition between the communities.

WM: Oh yes, great competition.

Q: I remember Amber Valley winning all the games.

WM: Well we used to have a two-day picnic. Teams would come from, there'd be at least ten ball teams come to participate in the ball tournament.

Q: So that would be the culture of getting along with the other communities, being the highlight.

WM: That was the highlight of the season. That was the highlight of the year.

Q: So you were part of that as a young kid growing up and seeing what everybody did?

WM: No, I wasn't part of the Amber Valley sports. I was a little too young for that. But as we went to Grassland School in 1958 I participated in sports there at the Grassland School. I got to play volleyball, basketball, baseball, football, and I really liked it.

Q: How was Amber Valley viewed as a community?

WM: Amber Valley was a great place to grow up. You knew everybody and everybody looked after everybody. If your parents weren't there, you'd best be on your best behavior because somebody else could take your parents' place. So it was good.

Q: So it was a pretty tight-knit community.

WM: Fairly tight-knit.

Q: How did you like the school, besides the sports aspect?

WM: Grassland School was great. We were able to get our full education there in Grassland, met a lot of nice children, grew up there with a lot of nice children. Still friends with a lot of people I went to school at Grassland with. We didn't have any problems as far as you were just an individual.

Q: What about the teachers?

WM: The teachers were great, really great. I have nothing bad to say about Grassland.

Q: What was your first job?

WM: My first job was in 1961. I worked for a pipeline company in Slave Lake, Alberta, by the name of Preston Clark. It rained so much that summer that even on a dry day you were wet up to your knees. It was unbelievable how much rain it rained up there. That company lost three or four caterpillars that year because of the swamp and muskeg. That

was my first high school summer employment job. That was the beginning of wanting to work a little bit more so I could earn a little bit more money. That was my first paying job. Two weeks' pay was \$139, and you got your room and board. We had oil heaters and sometimes on days when it was raining and couldn't work they would go out and they were difficult to get started.

Q: The heaters?

WM: Your camp heaters, your bunk heaters. So you spent some cool nights and some damp days.

Q: After that, did you get work elsewhere?

WM: After that I came back and went to school, and I was taking my grade 10. So I finished that year and then I went out to work again the next summer.

Q: Same company?

WM: No, I went to work for a different company the next summer. I went to work in a factory here in Edmonton that made metal, not siding, but sort of metal stacks and things for pipes and for roofs and stuff like that.

Q: How did you learn the skills to do your work?

WM: Well, you were trained on the job. You were trained on the job. You were given a job and they put you with someone that was experienced in their job, and that's how you learned.

Q: There wasn't any training institutions or anything like that.

WM: That's right.

Q: How has the process changed over the years?

WM: Oh, it's a big change from then till now. There were so many different things that was invented and so many different types of work coming along and so many things you could choose to do. Apprenticeship was starting and lots of different employment chances if you wanted to. At one time I could've drove bus for the City of Edmonton but I was sort of a farm boy and hands-on, wanted to learn doing different things, so I didn't take a steady job like that. Then I started apprenticing and from there that's where I'm at today.

Q: Were you ever injured on the job?

WM: No, I was never injured on the job, never injured. Most injuries, they claim, quote unquote, is a lack of common sense or lacking fear of what's going on. They claim that 90 percent of the incidents and accidents could be avoided if you just take time and look the situation over. So I could get very good at that.

Q: It's the young guys who think they're invincible.

WM: Well the big secret to keep from getting hurt on the job is taking instructions very well. If you're in doubt, ask again. Somebody will show you how to avoid getting hurt, and that's pretty well it. . . . But before I leave that, the main thing is to be focused. Be focused and concentrate on what you're doing, and that will avoid a lot of injuries.

Q: That's what a lot of people don't have.

WM: Sometimes their minds wander a little bit.

Q: Were you involved in Fort McMurray in the boom days in the building of plants up there?

WM: Yes, I finished grade 12 in 1965 and I went to McMurray. I was there about three weeks doing little minor jobs and then I got hired on at Great Canadian Oil Sands, which is called Syncrude today. I got hired on with a company by the name of Canadian Bechtel as a labourer, and that was steady employment. I stayed with the Labourers' Union for a year and then I got the opportunity to join the Insulators' Union. I had a great friend there that helped me get in, by the name of Stan Peers. He treated me excellent, and I have nothing but good to say about Stan Peers. That's where I started my apprenticeship, and I stayed there until 1969. Then I transferred from Suncor, which it's called today, down to Redwater fertilizer plant for Fuller Austin, and I stayed with them another year or two, and then I started venturing out working for other companies.

Q: Tell me a bit about your experience on the Great Canadian Oil Sands project.

WM: Well, Canadian Bechtel was an American firm and they were a big construction outfit. They did have fairly good safety rules, a lot of supervision, and a lot of opportunity. I have nothing bad to say about Canadian Bechtel. They had a good camp, ran a good ship, and all you had to do was sail.

Q: What kind of treatment did you get from the company and from the workers? Were you ever overlooked for positions that should've had?

WM: I sometimes think maybe that was the case. But sometimes there was people with more experience than I had or had been there longer than I had been, and was maybe more deserving of it. But, as time went, on I was supervisor for quite a few years, and I'm thankful for that. I was one of the first black insulators from Local 110 and I'm proud of that for blazing the trail. I wasn't given too hard a time. But it's just like anywhere you go. You can feel things in the air but it's never spoken. So you learn your way around and you learn how to duck and how to dodge and sort of stay clear of things.

Q: Was there a time when you felt you were overlooked for a position?

WM: There were a few times when I felt I deserved a position that somebody else got, but that was just my feeling. The company had the final say. So I looked at it like this – if I wait long enough I'll get it. And eventually it came.

Q: Were you involved with the union?

WM: Yes, I was involved with the union. I was a job steward in 1976 for Local 110, which is Insulators' Union. For over 300 men I was a job steward. I counted that a privilege.

Q: In that role, were there any issues you were able to settle?

WM: I had quite a few experiences that I was able to settle and help a worker. Some you win, some you lose. Politics plays a big part.

Q: You were the first black guy to get hired on by the union. Were there any others coming up after you?

WM: Yes, there were some came up after I did and as far as I know today. I've been retired now for five years, and as far as I know today there's more coming into the Insulators' Union. But I only know a few of them that was there when I was there, and they seem to all be doing fairly well.

Q: Apparently Mike Woodward couldn't get hired until he told them he was Mexican.

WM: Well that could only happen to Mike Woodward.

Q: It's just a matter of getting that foot in the door.

WM: Well the big thing is you have to make a name for yourself. You have to be willing to go to work every day and do some work, and be able to understand and take orders.

Sometimes people just don't want to listen, and that's what'll get you in trouble. But normally if you take orders and listen, do as you're told, why wouldn't you be liked? You're not giving your supervisor any problems. So where would the problem be unless it was your problem?

Q: That sounds like a really good attitude.

WM: I thought it was a good attitude.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share about what it was like to be working on a major jobsite like that?

WM: Well one of the beautiful things about working on a major jobsite, you meet people from all over the world. I've been on two or three different jobsites where they have brought workers in from Ireland, Scotland, United States, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, PEI, Ontario, Quebec. It gives you a wide diverse of other people and their lifestyle and their cultures, and learning things about their country that you wouldn't normally get to know about, and make some fairly good friends that I still stay in touch with today.

Q: So you appreciated the fact that there were people from other places?

WM: Well certainly, certainly.

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

WM: Well I can say my childhood was great; my school years was great. You're always gonna have some ups and downs. My years in the workforce was great. For a spare hobby I played music, played music for 25 years. Got to meet a lot of musicians, a lot of different bands. Enjoyed it and still play today. When I leave this interview I'm on my

way to Yuma for six weeks to play music with some more great musicians for six weeks. You can't ask for too much better life than that.

Q: Were you involved in any other recreational activities or community groups?

WM: I joined one community group and sometimes I wonder if that wasn't a mistake because of the politics. I'll leave that there.

Q: Where were your parents from originally?

WM: My grandparents were from the United States. One group from our grandparents was from Texas and Oklahoma and the other group from our grandparents was from Oklahoma and Kansas. My mom and dad was first generation born here and I'm second generation born here.

Q: So were your grandparents coming out of the Oklahoma riots?

WM: Well I never heard them speak of Oklahoma riots. I just heard them talking about moving north because that was the trend in those days, to keep moving north to a better life. They wanted to make a better life for their children. So here they ended up in Alberta.

Q: You must have worked on the farm as a kid.

WM: Oh yes. On the farm growing up on the farm you had chores to do, and that was good for a child. You had your chores to do, your brother had his chores to do, your sister had her work to do, and then we all helped in the garden. Us boys helped pick rocks and work in the field with dad, and it was all preparing you to go out to work later in life. So you had some idea of what must be done to survive, cuz you know it's not always the best when you have to take orders from your father or from your mother because sometimes it's do as I say and ask no questions. And that was that.

Q: Did you experience any discrimination in Athabasca?

WM: I'll put it like this. As far as actual discrimination, you could feel things but it was never spoken. At that time it was sort of a fear for people to make a mistake and say things they shouldn't be saying, but you could feel it. You experienced it but you couldn't say for sure that this was the basis.

Q: The winning baseball team also helped too.

WM: Well in my dad's day playing ball with the ball team, they played all over. I never heard them talk about that they experienced anything drastic.

Q: But they were good.

WM: They had to be good. They had to be good to be invited, and they were invited to all the major tournaments in the area and areas surrounding where they were born and raised.

Q: I know the communities certainly admired the Amber Valley baseball team.

WM: Well they played for fun too, and they had a few players on the team that carried on a little foolishness and put on a little different you know, a little different show where it wasn't so uptight. And they had fun, and that's what life's all about, is having some fun.

Q: What kind of music do you play?

WM: I play country, I play some blues, some jazz, some alternative country, some Latin American, and I'm hoping to get better at all of them. And country.

Q: What instrument?

WM: Guitar.

Q: You must've been in a number of bands over the years.

WM: I think I've been in approximately six bands, and I had a band of my own for 25 years. I'm glad to say that I had the same musicians for 11 years. My drummer was black, my lead player was German, and my bass player was Ukrainian, and we were just like brothers. We had a lot of fun and made what I thought good music.

Q: You must've been a good band to stay together that long.

WM: Eleven years and never had one cross word. Not one, not one cross word.

Q: You guys must've been making money.

WM: We made good money and we done the best we could do.

Q: Did you play dances and things around the community?

WM: I play with one group now that, most of my work now is I'm giving back. I play with two or three different bands and we do work for seniors. We do work for like when I go to Yuma, Arizona I play there for six weeks with different musicians. There we play for the Shriners, and that's a big organization. The Shriners do a lot of good work. So I feel proud of that, that I'm invited to come and be a part of that. I was just invited to a large jamboree here at Radway, Alberta the long weekend in May. There'll be over 600 people that come out to listen to me. I get a half-hour slot. Those things make you feel good to give back in.

Q: So it's kind of a high point.

WM: It's a high point in my life, ya.

Q: Back to Amber Valley, I know that the church was a big factor there. Did you attend church or know anything about it?

WM: Yes, I was raised to go to church until I got big enough that I didn't wanna go anymore and mom and dad didn't make me go anymore. But it was good. At least you had some biblical teachings. You were taught right from wrong. Those are the things you carry all your life. I feel sorry for a child that's not, don't have those opportunities, because you really don't have no guidance, no structure. By being able to go to church from a kid, Sunday School up until the time that I quit going to church, mind you I'm not proud that I don't go to church today. I still think about it, but there's so many different denominations and so many different teachings out there now from the way I was taught.

Q: What was the denomination?

WM: Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, that was the church that I came up in and the religion.

Q: In Amber Valley it was a real community thing.

WM: That's right. That was the thing, and Mother's Day and things like that. You'd see people sometimes you didn't see all year, especially the older people. But I must say one thing. The one big highlight other than the Amber Valley ball team was our Christmas parties. We had a teacher by the name of Ruby Edwards and a few other teachers like Mrs. Krizample, and they took time with those kids to get a concert together. So you learned how to work with other kids early and you learned, cuz you wanted to do your part well cuz you wanted your parents to be proud of you and you wanted people to clap for you. So it gives you a drive in life that some kids just, I think, miss. But I had all those things.

Q: And obviously there was music.

WM: Yes. And another highlight in my life was my grandfather Mapp. He was 64 when I was born. I was able to work with him from the time I was 12 years old. He used to tell me a lot of stories about when he was a kid and coming to this country and how hard it was to make a living, and he instilled in me that you had to work, you had to have good work ethics, and that you couldn't be as good, you had to be better. So that just gave you a drive to always try to do your best, and that's how I survived.

Q: Was your first job in the Athabasca area?

WM: Slave Lake, Alberta. They were putting a pipeline through there.

Q: I notice you're wearing a Fort Chip ball cap – where does that come from?

WM: My son gave me this--my oldest son. His mother was from Fort Chip. So he was up there and he brought this hat back for me. So I was sort of compelled to wear it.

Q: His mother is from Fort Chip?

WM: His mother is from Fort Chip, yes.

Q: What does an insulator do?

WM: I was an industrial insulator, and we work on these refineries. There's so many things that have to be insulated to keep from freezing up, and different aspects of the trade. Piping is very hot and you have to put insulation on it, calcium silicate. Sometimes they use a different type, but to keep people from getting burnt. Pumps and compressors and towers, exchangers – it's interesting work. I used to tell all the other different trades, it doesn't make any difference if your trade looks good or not. We'll make you look good when we cover it up. We'll make you look good.

Q: It sounds pretty dangerous as well.

WM: Well now they've got a lot of different things than when I started, as far as breathing apparatuses for dust control, and so many different things. If you use your dust mask and if you keep the places well ventilated and this and that, you can live a long life. But if you don't, you can shorten your days.

Q: The safety precautions by the international union are well known, but they weren't able to convince the companies to do a lot of that.

WM: They knew in advance but they didn't wanna admit it until some of the insulators started to get sick with lung problems. Now it's a well known fact that lung problems was caused from insulation dust. There are different types of insulation. There's fiberglass insulation; there's many different types of insulation. Most of them give off some sort of dust. That's why that dust mask is very important. The other important thing is wearing good eye protection and good hearing protection, because when you're working in these live refineries, there is a fair amount of noise. So if you wanna be safe and be older in age and still have good ears, you'd best wear your ear protection.

Q: One of the problems that I'm aware of is that the doctors are not aware of the hazards that insulators face.

WM: Is it that they're not aware or is it that they really try to shy away from the problem? They may have to answer questions.

Q: The number of insulators that are dying off now for being misdiagnosed or not even aware of the international standards ...

WM: Well that's why we have a strong, good union. I think if a person is having problems they should go to the union, to the people that are in charge, and make reports,

and I think they would get a little bit further. We do have provisions for things like that now, and they could help you out a lot through the health and safety and maybe help you with doctors and stuff like that where they can send you to be tested. Cuz we have to have a physical, I think it's every two or three years now where they test your lungs and stuff like that. A big thing too is I think if you want to be in that you shouldn't really smoke. But now most jobs that is just coming up from the ground up, they allow you to smoke sometimes on the job. But on a live job where the plant's running and everything, they have fenced-off areas where you can smoke. So everything works hand in hand, because you get that tar from cigarette smoke on your lungs and insulation fibres and things get into your system, and there you start a growth.

Q: The example I'm thinking of is my brother, who was misdiagnosed and the cancer was in his liver. The doctors were treating him for everything else but the real thing. That was a very sad indictment of the medical profession.

WM: Well they know a lot more now about it than they did, because now there's the awareness. You see it advertised on television. It's called mesothelioma or how do you pronounce that word. It's a lung disease, and you see it advertised on TV and they're telling people, if you've worked in these different industries, to be tested. They're really pushing it now.

Q: For a while they really didn't know. When I was growing up, asbestos is how you insulated.

WM: That's right.

Q: Now they know that's not good, and you've got all this abatement going on.

WM: That's right. Now they've changed the quality of the insulation where you don't have that asbestos in it, but before that's what insulation was.

Q: How would you sum up your work life?

WM: Well if I was younger and wasn't retired, of course you can make an excellent living. I think I'd have worked harder than I did before. I think I'd done a fair day's work for a good day's pay. But there's good opportunities now. The beautiful thing about it is, you can travel. You're just not stuck in one place. If there's work somewhere else, you can go. But at one time you were sorta stuck in your province.

Q: Tell me about the camps. How many days would you be on and how many days off, and all that?

WM: Well, when I was still in the trade, we were working 11 and three days on three days off. Sometimes you'd work; all depends, 10 days on, four days off, all depended on what job you're on. But it wasn't like it used to be. You worked six days a week and you had one day off. We used to have one day off in the early years and we would drive all the way from McMurray on Saturday night after work to Edmonton, stay overnight, drive back for work Monday morning. Well, for guys that had a family, that wasn't enough time. So now it's changed that they only allow you to work so many hours, so many days at so many hours. So it's better.

Q: But some people are on split shifts, which is really hard.

WM: I don't know if that's in the insulation industry. I don't know if that's in effect yet. But when I was still in the trade I worked nights for three years cuz I chose to. It's more responsibility on you, less supervision during the day, less people around. So you concentrated on what you had to do that night. You're on call if other things went wrong. So it gave you a sense of responsibility and accomplishment.

Q: How do you respond when people ask you who you are?

WM: First of all I tell them that I am a human being, I am a Canadian, and I belong to the black race and I'm proud of that.

[END]