

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Gerry Beauchamp

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

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Location: Edmonton, AB

I started working for Swifts in August of 1952. I was working on the loading dock. When we first started there, we used to ice the cars in the morning. After we finished icing the cars, mostly was railroad cars at that time, very few trucks. Icing the cars. You had to put ice in there. There used to be an ice house. There was a pond in the back of the plant where they made ice. We had guys cutting ice in the wintertime and somebody else was taking it to the ice house to put it in there. Then we used to go in the ice house, break the ice, put it on the elevator, crush it, we had a crusher on top, and we used to ice the cars. So much salt with the ice so it would keep. That's the first thing that we done in the morning. After that we went to load beef. After that in the afternoon we used to help load trucks, boxes. After 7 months they wanted me to check, so the foreman asked me if I would be interested in checking the product. I was quite interested in it. So in the morning I used to ice the cars and load beef, and in the afternoon I used to go checking. So at least I get a break, it wasn't too bad.

No, just quarters of beef. They used to come upstairs they would be quartered. It was a side coming down. But we used to saw the bone and then somebody cut the flank. When we had it on our shoulder you just got the flank. When I got more seniority that's what I

was doing also. We had to take it into the car and hang it in the car. It's heavy work. At that time I was young, and I was used to heavy work. But over the years...then I was checking just about all day. The more seniority you get, you move on. Checking product going to Calgary, different places. At one time when we first started we had to take the weight of all the product in there. We used to have a bill with the product in there. We used to put the weight on it and they had the gross weight on the box. There used to be 5 or 6 items on it. But over the years that changed a bit.

We didn't tattoo the beef. The beef cooler used to come down and clean up the beef. We used to load it. The tattooing was done in the beef cooler. You must've been talking to George Kozak. That's what he was doing most of his life.

Over the years I got interested in the union. I became a shop steward in the early '60s. Then I was assistant chief steward. Then I became the chief steward, then I became president. I was president for 10 years or so.

We were trying to get better wages, number one. Number two, better fringe benefits and pension. Anything that was any good for the working people, we'd try to get as much as we could from the company. Which wasn't easy. But you can get whatever you want from the company, but if you get something, you'd better keep it. With the stroke of a pen you can lose everything. That's exactly in '84 what happened. If '84 would've have happened, if we never gave no concession to Pocklington, '86 would have never happened. But over the years it did. That was a major concession. There was some outfits

in the States, and I was keeping tabs of everything that was going on in the labor movement. Not only in Canada but through the US. It's the same thing in 1965. A lot of the companies had a pension plan. But the employee put money into it, and then the company didn't exist anymore, they took the pension fund and the employees were left with nothing. So in 1965 that law was changed. Different things was happening at that time. A lot of companies in the US got rich on the money from the employees.

Ya, everything. Safety was one of the things that we used to argue with management on getting things fixed. We'd get a certain amount of it done, but a lot of it we couldn't get done. They waited till somebody got critically injured, and then fix it. Why not fix it prior of doing this?

There's a specific one that a guy just about lost his life on the killing floor. One of the circular saw he was handling, he had to handle it. It went out of proportion and just about got him. Lucky he got away, but he got injured quite a bit. That's one of the things that happened. We were complaining about that saw to be fixed properly. We even told the employee not to use it. But I'm gonna lose my job if I don't use it. Then we went to management and told them that if they don't get it fixed, they're not going to operate it. But they kept on operating the same way. Oh it's fixed. But it wasn't, and people get hurt that way. It's been a constant battle with safety with any company I worked for. Especially in the packinghouse.

In this neighborhood. I used to live in Beverly. In '57 I got married and live in Beverly. That wasn't too far. I drove.

Some of the employees I got along with, ya.

I was born and raised in Ottawa, not here.

When I first started there it was talk about layoff. Then finally I never got laid off, I was lucky. But talking to the older fellows prior to 1947 till the union got in strong, they used to go to the gate. There might be 10 or 15 people wanted a job. So the foreman go in there and see how much muscle you had. If you had a lot of muscle they hired you. That's stories I was told.

I just went inside and applied for a job. They needed somebody at the particular time.

They asked me if I can do every work and I said yes. So that's the way I got hired. I got hired on the loading dock. If I would've been hired on the killing floor or the pork cutting, I don't think I would've stayed there. It's harder and you're standing in one spot doing the same thing over and over again. At least when you were working on the dock, the truck drivers or whoever used to come and pick up the stuff. Even in the early years you had a certain amount of trucks coming in or somebody from another department would come in. You can chat with them and keep up with your work. On the killing floor and those places, I wouldn't say that.

Over the years there's been quite a bit of change. When I first started there, there was about 650 people working there. The ? loading dock?? We used to work pretty hard. Now they got machinery. Although they hire more people, because the line went faster. Over the years we had control. On the killing floor the line can go so fast per hour. If it was going anymore, we used to argue with the foreman and put it on ourself. If we had to, it's the same thing with pork cutting. When Pocklington took over, that all changed. We used to kill in 8 hours around 1700 hogs per day. In 9-1/2 hours day they used to kill about 2800. When Pocklington took over, everything had to go faster. They put a few more

men in the line and they wanted everybody to keep up. They were up to 5200 hogs per day. The people were doing it slowly. We're putting more men into the line. Eventually they'd take a few more men out of the line and you still had to keep up with the work. That's the way it worked.

When I used to be the president of the local union I said to everybody, as long as you do an honest day's work. You're here to make money for the company, because otherwise the company's not going to exist if we don't produce. I used to say, do an honest day's work, but don't rush yourself. Because if you're running, that's when you're prone to accidents. That's why now there's more accident in industry and everything, because everybody's in a hurry to go nowhere. You're not producing anymore, because if you have a major accident on a job, then it slows everything down. But a lot of people can't understand that. When Swift was there, we thought they were a really bad company. It's like anything else. If you want to negotiate anything, you gotta fight and argue to try to get the most you can at negotiation. But we came from a long ways away. At one time for sick pay we never paid a penny into it when Swift was in there. But we lost part of that in '84. If you had 5 years service you will collect sick pay of 50% of your wages for the first week. If I was sick one day, I'd get 50% of my wages. On the 2nd week we got 55%, the 3rd week 60, and 65%. We didn't have to pay into it. In '84 it was dismantled and we had to wait a week before we got any sick pay. We had to pay \$5.50 a week into the sick pay. Therefore your earnings are going down.

... in '84 we should've never accepted. I told the people at the meeting not to accept this, because we were losing quite a bit. I was president till 1982 and after that I got defeated. In '84 I wasn't the president. But I was at the meeting arguing to tell the people not to

accept this. Once you do it once, you gotta do it all the time. The company tell you one thing, we can't survive without this or that. It's all a bunch of crock. A few months prior to that down the road what Pocklington was doing, he was trying to break the marketing board. Trying to break the farmers, but they didn't go along with it. So then he couldn't get his way that way, so he started working on his own employees in the plant. That's the way '86 happened. In '86 we went to negotiation and apparently he wasn't going to give anything. He wanted us to lower our wages and lose some more benefits. We told him, this is it. So we went on the picket line. I think the majority of people know about the vicious strike that we had. My role in that was that I was working with the 2 national representatives, Ed Seymour and another guy. I was getting the information how much product. When he had the scab into the plant, how much product was going out of that plant. I had a committee of all the truck drivers. They knew the route. We were following these trucks to find out exactly where the product was going. I was making the list of all the places that they deliver and put it in the strike area. After that we had another committee after we went to talk to the people that were buying from Gainers, to stop buying. If they didn't stop buying we would picket their premises. We had a committee that done that. So we had a committee following the trucks, we also had a committee ... and I was put on the committee with another individual, Bill Spink helped me. We were going to these stores that were buying the Gainers product to try and talk them into not buying it. That if they kept on buy it we would picket their premises. We came to the conclusion that the output wasn't very much. When we were in the plant we knew how much we were putting out per day. The report that I was getting from the plant...I used to get the information how much was shipped here and there. Even in the city, it was very

minimal. Then after that they talked to me about putting a committee to go to these different provinces to talk to the people to get the support. We had the support of the labor movement. But we needed more than that. We needed the support of the general public also. So we sent people all over the country, like Vicky was talking about. Had different meetings with different locals to get the support so they don't buy the Gainers product. Until today, a lot of people would never buy the Gainers product or the Maple Leaf or whatever they call it.

We had people in Toronto and Nova Scotia. I was in Montreal because I can talk French. I went to a couple of meetings and had somebody write my speech in French. I can read it fine, but if they ask me a question I have to think twice and it wouldn't come out the way it should. A lot of people knew a bit of English so it didn't matter too much. But at least we told our story and then we got a lot of support from all of them.

They were supportive. Except the storekeepers. He had a bunch of Swift and Gainer product on his shelf and he wouldn't take it off. But we picketed a couple of places and it helped a little bit.

When we were on the picket line I used to spend hours on the picket line. More so than when I was working. They come together. It's the same thing on the picket line. You gotta keep on talking. We had an 88% strike vote, so there was about 12% of the people that you had to talk to. Keep talking to them to keep them together. Although there's one or 2 that crossed the picket line, but that's to be expected. For the amount of people that crossed the picket line, it was a successful strike. One or 2 I'm not going to say too much

about that. But the rest of the people we talked to and kept them on our side and said, it's your livelihood. If we all go back, then you're not going to get an agreement. Then they'll do whatever they want.

After the strike. I retired in 1994. After the strike. I was there for at least 8 years, '86 to '94. The turnover was tremendous. The atmosphere in the plant was terrible. When Swift was in there you didn't mind going to work. You had a job, you had to go to work. When I heard Pocklington was going to buy Swift, I knew we'd have nothing but trouble with that guy. That's exactly what happened. The atmosphere used to be way different. When you integrated 2 plants, one plant was different from the other. Then you had to talk to them. A lot of their ways was just like a big family over there. Over here it was a bit different. You did everything according to seniority. Over there they weren't doing it. They had some buddies in there. You don't operate that way. You operate according to your seniority. The women wanted equal pay for equal rights. When we finally got it through negotiation with Swift, a lot of the women came and gave me hell because we never should've agreed to it. I told them, don't worry about it. We have to talk to management and say the jobs that were women's jobs stay as women's. Before when there was a layoff they couldn't go on any other job. They were laid off because there was no work in that particular department. When we got equal rights, then they would have the chance to go on another job. If they choose to go on a different job, then they had to perform it the same way as a man did. Some of the women went on different jobs and done it. Some of them couldn't do it, so they took a layoff. Then they were recalled according to seniority.

The hurt was there. After '86 especially. The hurt was there. The employees didn't trust the company, the atmosphere in the plant was different. Except the people you work with, they were good. A lot of times you didn't feel like going to work. You try to do the best you can, and that was it. The atmosphere was different. Before we used to joke with each other. Towards the end it wasn't like that. More pressure all the time. They want you to do more. On my job, I was checking all the time and had a loader. So we weren't too pressurized. But we had to keep on going. Some days weren't too busy so it wasn't bad. Some days were busy. But you work on the line, that's a different story. You gotta keep on going.

... When I first started there we used to belong to the United Packinghouse Workers. That was the name of our union. Then a few years after that, I forget when we changed, but it was in the '60s sometime, to the Amalgamated Meat Cutters of America. That was the union of the Safeway butchers. Not the shelf workers. Later on that union became too small, so we merged into a bigger union. That involved all the people that were working at Safeway or in a store. They amalgamated meat cutters. In the Canadian section we called ourselves the United Food and Commercial Workers. The 3 mergers, we were involved. We had to go to the meetings. The international held a meeting and that was part of it. In the long run it was better. The bigger the union is, the more power you have with a company. Then if you go on the picket line they know you've got the money to back you. This is why the changes were made over the years.

We started with the Packinghouse, then went with the Amalagamated Meat Cutters, then became the United Food and Commercial Workers.

Bill Spink that you talked to over there, he started in '45. Even when I first started in the plant in '52, they were killing chickens on the back dock. They were also killing turkeys. They used to sell cream, they used to sell butter. They used to have a creamery department. Then down the road they built their own poultry plant that used to be on 125th St & 82nd St, and they were doing all the poultry over there. Eventually we kept on selling butter but there was no creamery department. They got rid of it once they moved. That was in the latter part of the '60s I think. Over the years that's what happens.

At one point the building was really bad. Swift had to decide what they were going to do. Rebuild every floor, because it was all wood. All the pillars was wood, and if you went down to the basement it was deteriorating pretty bad. For the product and machinery they were bringing in, the floors would have never stood it. So they got a contractor in and redone every floor of the major plant. They put seal in it and concrete and make sure the thing don't collapse. That's when they built TRM, that white building on the other side. The distribution center is on this side, it was done after '84. In '83 they built the distribution center.