

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Vicky Beauchamp

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

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Location: Edmonton, AB

In 1959. I started out in the wiener room packaging wieners. Where they scale them they came down on a line, and you scale them a point per package. They went at the end of the line to be packaged off. The building was cold. It was on the 7th floor.

Yes, it was mainly women working, with a male foreman. There had to be in the neighborhood of 13 women at that time. Then they were downsizing, if I recollect right. I had an injury there, I can't recall the year. We were the youngest of the group. We were on cleanup. I remember at the very last station there was a bare wire. I was quickly cleaning up because the staff had gone for coffee. I connected a tray to a live wire. I got a jar in my back. It seemed like the current went right down my leg. I had gone off on compensation after that. They said there was nothing wrong, and somehow they said I couldn't have had it. The inspector came out to check it. The company had taped it up very secretly. They said, which station did it happen on? So I told them. Obviously, when the inspector went in there, he saw that it had been taped. So I eventually got my compensation through the board, returned to work, and actually had a very difficult time in the plant. Perhaps at that time I should've left into a different field, but I didn't. I continued to do it. I came as a background of a farm girl who knew the hard life, and worked hard. Later on the built the

packaging, which is the white building on the side. We left the 7th floor and went into that building. In that one, I worked on the wiener line on the peeler. We worked different lines, but basically I was on the wiener line. There too I was casing off, I was working the wiener peeler. One day I was casing off because another girl had not made it to work on time. Casing off is packaging at the end of the line. You package 12 packages to a box. There was a gentleman by the name of Joe Farrell, bless his soul, he's passed on. He'd turn up the machine, and he'd really run it quickly. You had rejects coming and leakers, so you'd throw them here and there. You're trying to package this, where normally two people did it, I was doing it by myself. That day I turn around and when this happened, I went to pile the boxes 12 to a case. So there was two boxes, which was 24. I had four boxes by this time. I took two and put two in a pallet. Swung around to put two, and my table was full of wieners, and that was it. My back just jarred. I couldn't get up, I couldn't do anything. All Joe said was, if you can't do your job, go home. So they carried me out. There was a gentleman by the name of Mark Koriko and I don't know who the other guy was. With their arms they made a bench and carried me out to the nurse's office. They took me to the Royal Alec, and I was off with back strain, as they said, no real injury. But eventually I was let go from the plant. This happened in April, and by the end of June I had no job. So I left, and as a result of that today I still suffer with major back problems. Somehow they didn't seem to find it at the time, but it continually plagued me. I was young, unmarried. Therefore, what does a young person do? You try to get back into the workforce as best you could. You don't want to go on welfare, so you turn around and I'm saying this is what they call labour intense industry. I got myself, can I get out of it now that I've sustained a back injury? I tried numerous places to get employment. Although

my qualifications were fairly good, I finished high school, as soon as they found out I had a back injury, oh dear. I guess we will get hold of you if need be. So you knew you were a risk, it didn't matter what employment you went into. So while Swifts packing plant was on strike, and Canada Packers and Burns, I ventured out to Gainers, because they had not been on strike. They were separate negotiations. I had applied there, thinking if these were on strike, I would go there and get back into whatever I knew to do best. Which was the meatpacking industry, which was labour intense.

Yes it was. So I went back, basically because the wages were good. The benefits were quite good for women. And I knew it well, so I wasn't afraid. In spite of the fact that I had a back injury, I had to learn to do things different and be very careful and cautious. So I did not tell them that I had sustained this back injury, because I was a risk and probably would have never got employment. The WCB wouldn't help to place me anywhere, which they're kind of sensitive today, but they're not doing anything about it. So I continued working there for two years, when a foreman ran over my foot with a power jeep. Now I had to claim WCB, and have you ever been on WCB before? This is I think a worker's worst nightmare. It's labour intense, you've got to be strong, and you've already got a weak back. Now you've got a sore foot. So in the process of that I did report it, never said anything about my back. Watched it very carefully, did exercises, and tried to stay away as far as I could from that. In the process of that, Peter Pocklington bought out Gainers from Agra. Shortly thereafter he bought out Swifts. So now what do we do? At the time his name was Percy Gibson, and he negotiated an integrating agreement with UFCW that the south side Gainers workers would be integrated with the Swifts workers.

I said, now I come back from one place who has accepted me, and I'd worked there since 1974. Now in 1982 I'm integrating into a place that had fired me. I said, but I guess you get strength from whatever, because this is your livelihood. By this time I'm married. My husband also works in the plant. When I get in there, oh my god, here's the lady who got fired. It's hilarious in a way, I can sit today and laugh about it. But many times I went home and had a good cry, as to how unfair it was. But it was food on my table and like I said, I lived fairly well from the wages that we had. That part I enjoyed. It did good for us. We raised my son on the income, went on holidays, did different things. The benefits were good. In time we seen that it started to deteriorate. Once we integrated and Peter Pocklington wanted rollbacks. Like he says, my business is going under and so I need some help to be a steady employer. The majority of the people believed him. They believed that he was fair and honest. He had a party and said once he built this up he would certainly share the profits with us. To our nightmare, guess what? When the time came, he rewarded us with a black axe. We were out on the picket line in June 1986. One that soon is not to be forgotten.

From the Swifts plant on 66th Street to the plant on the south side, it was probably family oriented. To people there, it was a little family. Everybody got along, did things together. The Swifts plant on 66th St. was more businesslike. You were there to do a job. Somehow in that respect that one was more family, this was business. In that respect it was different. The building was much older. I think the company people there were more compassionate towards the workers than they were in this plant. They were more considerate. When they weren't busy, instead of laying us off as Swifts would have done

for business reasons, we had a foreman there that said, you know what, I've talked it over with the superintendent. Instead of laying you people off, I have some very good workers, I don't want to lose them. Once they get laid off, they venture into new jobs. Her name was Audrey. She said, we're going to keep, there was five of us. She said, there will be days when you'll have to go home at noon. I started there in July of '74. She said, maybe in October you'll get laid off. We'll try and keep you on all summer. But when this thing came up and she said, I really appreciate the genuine and sincerity and compassion and conscientiousness of you people. I want to keep you. I'm going to have a discussion. She did that, and she kept us on all winter. There's times when I walked in at 7 o'clock and punched in, quarter after 7 I was gone home. But only because there wasn't any work and she said, well at least you're on payroll. There was nothing guaranteed, but at least I knew I had a job. It was maybe one or two days a week for maybe a month or so, but at least you knew it was there. So you went in. That I didn't mind, because I realized that the company cared. Deep inside I knew I had a medical problem. So to me that was of some security.

Where did I live? Which was really sad. I lived on 61st St. and 121st Ave., which was only 5-1/2 blocks to Swifts. I used to run to work on the cold winter mornings. I used to walk to work in the summer. I had a vehicle, but I used to walk to and from work. When I got a job in 1974 at Gainers I had to drive to work. Eventually there I took a nightshift, which made it easier because my seniority carried me a little higher. There was younger people. Of course the youngest people go on nightshift. But I was one with more seniority, so I

didn't do the lower jobs, the heavier jobs. So it helped me through life that way, and they allowed me to do that.

Yes, very much so. That's the part that I really missed at the Gainers plant. Percy Gibson, bless his soul, he was a very good president. He said, and those were his exact words, he said, we need to exist as a company and make a profit. And we realize that you people have to make money to live. But if you help us make that profit, then we can share it. And that he did. That he did, as management. If there was a problem in the plant there, he as the president, and probably because it was a small plant, it was the only Gainers plant, he came in there. I recollect very vividly, I had just started there. We were in on a Saturday on overtime. The machine operator on the wiener line said, what on earth do you want me to do with these? This white haired gentleman walks in. I don't know who he is, but I'm told by the girls, just keep quiet and work. I was working on the bacon line. Just keep busy, because this is a very important gentleman that's here. There was three of them. I don't know who the other two were, but I remember Percy was one. Grace grabbed the wieners and went. She crushed them and went like this and flipped them up in the air and said, and what do you want me to do with this mess? He put his arm on his shoulder and he said, you know Grace, okay. He said to the divisional men, now what we'll do, and I was appalled because I thought he was going to fire her. He put his hand on her shoulder and said, I understand your frustration, your anger and anxiety. He said, we will shut this line down, we will send everybody home. He called the foreman over and said, okay we will tank all this stuff. We'll clean the smokehouses out, we'll clean the coolers out, and we'll start all over again. Because he was getting complaints about the product. We used

to have the best wieners, so he didn't want to lose that. He made sure he was going to start, even at the expense of getting rid of all of that, he was going to make a brand new batch. So he paid the people their time, everybody went home. Then I heard from the girls, if you complain to Percy, things get done. But he also wants honesty and sincerity from you as well. So that was the difference between that place and Swifts on 66th St. Maybe because it was a bigger conglomerate already, there was more plants. Gainers was one. It was just head office here, main plant here, and you had your CEO person in charge. Whereas this was bigger and already it loses that family oriented business.

Initially there was. But suddenly it's destroyed. It just starts to fall apart, because people are either moving out or they're looking for other jobs. Whether it be in another city, another province or another community. So they leave. We used to go, whether it be a church function or community function or weddings, xmas parties, you always ran into this group that you associated with. They got along, talked about different things, how to better the system and do better for the community and the province. When that happened, it sort of destroyed their self esteem. They're saying, gee I worked so hard, now I got nothing, they just closed on me. Burns was a prime example of that. I lost of girlfriend that was on 48. I honestly believe that in that process, that was one of the things that happened to her was she took it so hard. She worked at the plant. Although she had a cousin that was managing the Burns plant in Winnipeg, she said, I still don't believe they're going to shut it down. They just built the new distribution center. I'm not sure whether they portrayed it that we're going to stay open, or for business reasons they built it to say, we spent the money, they can have it as a writeoff, then they shut it down and

demolished it. On 66th St. the same thing. They build the new TRAM, they build the new distribution. Now it's shut. Did it make business sense at the time to spend that money, where maybe it could've been spent elsewhere?

... it seemed like as soon as Pocklington took over, we noticed a change probably two years after, that things were starting to change very quickly. People who worked in the plant under Mr. Gainer said that you were a name when you worked for Mr. Gainer. Agra took over, you became a number. Peter Pocklington took over, you became nobody. I said woops. This came from a lady whose husband was a foreman there. She said she remembered when the war ended, how very important and in high esteem Mr. Gainer held his employees. He knew them all by name. You were very important to him in his business. When Agra took over, suddenly you became a number, she said. That I never forgot. Then she said, and Pocklington took over and my god you're nobody today. It was a scary thought that you're like a piece of paper that goes to file G maybe. Then when the strike came, that's exactly how we felt.

.. I was not on the wiener line already when Pocklington took over. I was in TRM [Table Ready Meats], I was on the bacon line, they moved you. You were on the bacon line. The department was together, so if you were a junior person they move you wherever they needed you. I knew the work on all the lines, and basically there they're pretty well the same.

Oh yes, he wanted production. Like I said, he would have meetings with them. He would tell them. He would say, you can only do so much, and he bought it, with Percy Gibson at

the helm. Then Percy had become manager for a short period of time at Swifts on 66th St. Then because Percy didn't agree and didn't approve of the way he ran a business, he left for Toronto. His son was running what they used to call a little place on the south side that they produced, I forget what they were producing, some sliced meats or something. That was Bob Gibson, his son. But when the strike came on, he left as well. He too didn't approve of the way Pocklington handled the situation. It wasn't good business sense. Not for the community, not for the province, and not for the country. So Bob left as well.

You peak to the point, and then suddenly Pocklington came on the hill and took it. Either you're continuing to climb or go on a level plane and just glide along, or you're in a downhill roll. That's what happened with Pocklington. It seemed like when he took over, he came at a peak, he was doing really good in this plant on 66th St. His production was up to 8 million pounds a week before we went on strike, and he wants more. How much is more? What percentage of profit does this man anticipate? The sky's the limit for this man. That's what Percy saw in him, that there wasn't a limit in him for profits. He wanted a certain limit, and if he didn't get it, he would go all out and pull out and turf you because you weren't listening to what he was saying. He knew he would get it. He's gotten his way all his life, and he's going to get it again this time, or so he thought. It just seemed to have gone downhill. The 66th St. plant would've been a very profitable and viable business, had he been a very different individual who bought the processing plant, or in fact listened to some of the people who hired who were running the meat industry. I think he'd have done very well.

What was your role in the 1986 strike?

I was a strike captain. I'd just as soon forget sometimes. They remember your face very well. Even today they said, oh yes.

I was up on the roof. We were singing songs, Oh Canada, kept the policemen off the gate. God he says, I'm not coming to work, I'm booking in sick. Then we were boycotting, we were asking people to boycott. If they're with us on the strike, blow the horn. I remember at the time I wasn't aware of it, but Ed Seymour was from the national office. He came and had asked me a question. I said, get off my roof. He looked at me and said, I'm with you. I said, oh yes, everybody is right now. I said, get off my roof. We were asking the public to come onside with us and saying, Blain's got a contract, but Pocklington was why were out there on the picket line. It was for parity and justice. He told us he was going to share the profits with us, now he's giving us the black axe and throwing us out on the street. This is what it was all about. This is what we were trying to tell the public. That was our only way and means of publicizing it. I mean 66th St. is a thoroughfare, fairly busy. People coming through. A lot of people would slow down. You had a mike there and if you yelled loud enough they would hear it for blocks away.

How long did the strike last?

Six months. You knew why you were out there. Then when you tell people why you're out there, it's going to affect everybody. It's not only going to affect me as a worker, it's going to affect the whole community. It's going to affect the province, it's going to affect the country. Pocklington's main aim was to bust the union. He wanted to get rid of the union. There was no question of that at all, we were well aware of it. By this time, when is profits were so good and he didn't care. He came out on television and said he doesn't care, he's not gonna pay what these people want, and that's all there is to it. So he started

busing in the scabs, as we call them. Scabs is in the dictionary so I can use it. He just said that it didn't matter how much money he made, he wasn't going to share it with us. So in essence he reneged on what he told us he was going to do. So now we have the fighting power. The most timid people became very militant. At work if you said to somebody, the boss isn't treating you right, maybe I should go as a shop steward and talk to them. No, don't cause any trouble. But now their jobs were on the line. Now they're angry, now they're fighting. And like I said, we were a militant bunch. We weren't a violent bunch. But when somebody's stealing your job under your nose, you're gonna fight for that. That's your livelihood. Then you know that when they get back in there they're going to be complaining and crying wolf because, well I didn't know it was so bad. Well why do you think I went on the picket line?

Oh yes. Then when we started the boycott, because if you don't, when he started busing in scabs then you know the product is going to be going out. He had all this product stored up, so you know they're going to be in stores, people are going to be buying it. So we went and explained to people and asked them not to buy the product, to help us with this strike, to bring Pocklington back to the bargaining table to negotiate a decent contract. When you have a boycott in place, we said, it'll bring him down to his knees and he's got to come back. Or he's got to do something. Well, he said it wasn't going to affect him. We knew different. Today we really know the different, ten years later. At that point in time we knew that it was working, although he kept saying that, oh no, it's not hurting me a bit. But that was Peter. I think that's why people lost faith in him as a person, as a businessman, and as a community person. If he was a good community person, a good

businessman, I think everybody flourishes. Everybody grows from it and everybody respects him. In this case, I think he lost total respect. After that he sold Wayne. That's the type of person he is. So he hadn't changed much. People were saying that he's not a very good business person for this province. If you think of all the things he does. I think that's why people rally around. As soon as you mention Peter Pocklington, I don't want to touch it with a 10 foot pole. Whatever he owns, whatever he does, it turns people off. We had the most successful boycott in Canadian history, when we went on that boycott tour. It wasn't until you tell people across the country. We were able to do it quite successfully here in Alberta. When we started going across, I was billeted in Ontario. We had addressed some of that concern. We called Mr. Grocer telling me, why are you picketing my place? I said, because you're carrying the Gainers product. He said, well because Peter Pocklington is giving me a good deal. I looked at him very sternly and said, I'm the Gainers striker, and I'm here to tell you my side of the story. He said, no. I said, who shops in your store? He said, people. I said people like myself, correct? I said, Peter Pocklington doesn't give a damn if you go under the table tomorrow, cuz he'll move on to bigger and better things, I'm sorry. I said, I'm here to ask you to honor our boycott. He looked at me very sympathetically and almost shameful. He said, you know what, I'll honor the boycott till the strike is over. Why did it take a little lady to stand up to this great big Mr. Grocer owner, to explain to him. Peter Pocklington's giving him a good deal. Well Peter doesn't shop in your stores, and he's wanting me to work for nothing. And I am one who comes to your store, buys stuff. Today I can buy bread and milk, and if I get an increase I can even buy cookies for my children. If I don't get an increase, I'm lucky if I buy a loaf of bread and maybe a half quart of milk, because I can't buy a full

quart. So it's those kinds of things that we had to tell those people, and sort of draw pictures for them and tell them this is the situation.

I went off in '88 again. This just goes to show you the kind of company it was. It's sad to say that actually I went out when Gainers was still the owner, Pocklington was the owner. Safety was not a priority. I had fallen. We argued about safety. We're not listening to that. You don't like your job, there's thousands of people without work. I tripped over a hose, I had knee surgery. I had trouble with my back from before, it gave out again. They wouldn't take me back again. WCB said, ok we'll subsidize your wage for the month of June. I was to return June 4th. I was in a car accident, and that finished me. I had to go on permanent disability from there. But again, had somebody in an authoritative position listened to some of the safety aspects instead of profits over people's well-being, I wouldn't be in this position. I could contribute to the community, to the province, to the country. Now, sadly enough, I have to take an out. It's because of people like Peter Pocklington.

There was equal pay for equal work. Again, there's some work that women weren't able to do, like lifting heavy. So you'd get some foremen that were fairly sensitive and would say, oh it's okay, somebody else will do it. But then you got people, if you had a divisional superintendent who was wicked and would say, you want equal pay, then you do equal work. You've got to lift and do whatever. Sometimes that's not the case. Or they would say, well you can't do that job. Maybe we can move you around to do something else. Well I'm sorry, we should've done something about the safety aspect before. You had

a wage gap, you had pay from bracket 1 to bracket 30 or whatever. So somebody with a bracket 1 or 0, and I'm getting a bracket 6 as a machine operator, they're saying why am I doing her job? You couldn't seem to get through to them to tell them that you can't be doing this. You can't be switching Jane and put Sue in her job, because she's getting paid for doing that job, the other one's not getting paid. So either equalize it, bring it up to half way in between and say, well I'll pay you the same, we'll rotate you where safety is an issue, so you can do some of these things. Because I was one person who said this was too late for me. There were other women who did that. You had to tell them that this is going to cause a problem for someone, whether it's a shoulder or wrist, to go on compensation. They said, don't worry about it. So then we had to wiggle around with the mechanics and say to the safety coordinator, maybe we can do something. The superintendent doesn't agree with it, he's going to speed the lines up. He's going to do all these things. But people are complaining. They're all going to be on compensation pretty soon. The board gave them a window of opportunity and lowered their premiums again. This company turn around and took advantage of that. Instead of saying, okay we got a reduction in premiums, now we're going to look about the safety aspect to cut down the injuries. Instead, the injuries increased. All you were told was, don't worry, you have WCB. If you get hurt you can go on compensation. Which is wrong. Because they're giving you a cut in premiums because they're hoping that you're going to turn around and take safety into consideration. And that they didn't do. When this program came into place, I said it's a good program. But when they're past that boardroom door, you don't know what goes on in the department. And what goes on in the department is they're telling you they don't care. Profits over people's well-being and sorry folks, let the board

deal with you. The WCB has a thing ? for injured workers. The policies are in favor of company which was excellent for a plant like Gainers, Burns, and then became Maple Leaf.

How did you feel about the plant closure?

.... As a taxpayer today, I'm really annoyed. Not at the union, I'm annoyed at the Alberta government. When they foreclosed on Peter Pocklington when he defaulted on the loan. They said, ok they're taking everything. As far as we knew, they went in there. It was a default on the \$4 million loan he didn't pay. They took the plant, which was the building. They took the property, they took everything in the plant. The workers said, we're going to buy it. Jim Dinning came out very adamantly and said, I don't care if I close this place, I'm not selling it to the workers. No excuse was ever given. Burns came on the horizon, they asked again. Dave Mercer was involved. He said he wasn't going to sell it. If Burns doesn't get it, nobody's going to get it, he'll shut it down. Today I ask the question why. We will never know whether those workers would've kept the plant going or not. As a taxpayer today, I'm livid, because I'm on the hook for this whole mess, and 850 people are out of a job. This Tory government is to blame.