

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Ashley Grandy

Interviewers: Don Bouzek

Date: November 2005

Location: Brooks, AB

I'm Ashley Grandy from Grand Bank, Newfoundland.

I came out of high school, not really knowing what I wanted to do in college or in life. So I figured this was a good way to come and make some bucks, put it in the bank, and at least be able to pay my way through school. As time went on, the money was there. Then I sort of forgot about school. You sort of stayed around. I'll do it later, I'll do it later. Four years later I'm still here.

In Newfoundland, it's not great. The fish plants are laying people off pretty much every day. It's going more downhill than up, and it's been that way since the moratorium in 1990. I remember being a kid and you had whatever you wanted whenever you wanted. Then when the moratorium hit, you sort of looked at it. Okay, you might've been only a kid, but you knew then, okay your parents didn't have jobs, had to go find other work, they went back to school. It was hard during those times. Then as time went on, like you said, the jobs keep falling off and falling off and falling off. More people moved up here.

both of my parents were in the fish industry. When the moratorium came, both of them went and got retrained. Now my mother works part time with the town of Grand Bank, she gets in temporarily there. My father still actually works in the fish plant, but a different plant in Marystown, as opposed to the one in Grand Bank where he worked most of his days.

It's about an hour away.

Even young people, like up here 16 year olds can pick up a job anywhere. Back there, you got people kicking, screaming and clawing for jobs, anywhere between 18 and 50. They all want the same job. So the jobs go less and less, and the people have to move.

Grand Bank is a big fishing community. When the plant pulled out after the moratorium – we had scallops and clams there – it's still primarily a fishing community.

I came straight pretty much from, I went to cadet camp on staff that summer, and I earned enough money to pay for my ticket and my first couple of months up here. Packed up, and when I got back from Nova Scotia, packed up and moved straight to Alberta.

I had family here. My sister and brother is here. When I first moved up here I stayed with my sister.

How quickly were you able to get a job at Lakeside Packers?

Oh right away. I came here October 1st, put my application in on October 2nd, got my interview on the 3rd, and was working on the 4th.

Originally when I started, I was on the round line. I used to be an inside round trimmer. What it is, you know what an inside round steak is? You get the big hunk, which is pretty much the butt cheek of the cow. And you just trim the fat off of it, make sure everything is trimmed right. Then put it back down on the line, and pull your piece.

Qualifying time used to be 85 seconds, that's for training purposes to qualify you. I done that job at that plant, trust me, if you waited 85 seconds you'd have about 3 pieces come and gone. Let's say you get a piece every 30 to 45 seconds.

I know for my own purposes that when I worked on the round line, there was girl she was only there about 2 months at the time. All of a sudden she was just trimming her piece, and the next thing you know her knife slipped and cut her right in the bicep. She ended up 8 stitches deep. Like I said, you're working so fast. Another guy he used to work with me, he worked across the belt from me. One day he was trimming so fast and drying to get his stuff cut up, his knife actually flew out of his hand and came about that far from

clacking me in the arm. Like you said, it's a simple accident. The fact that you're working so fast, the knife flicked right out of his hands. Fortunately nobody got hurt, but the thing is somebody could have.

No. First when you came here, you were more concerned with the money aspect of it. The way I looked at it, I was going back to school, all I wanted was the money. So you've got to look at that. The first little while I was here, I was here a year before I could get a prearranged day. I asked my boss 5 different occasions for a day off because I had things to do, and I was refused every time. She'd give me a prearranged day off after a year for my sister's wedding. I had my vacation, and she prearranged me 4 days for my sister's wedding, and that was one of them. I came back from my sister's wedding, went back to work on that Thursday. She wrote me out for a no call no show. Because I didn't know that I needed a little white piece of paper with her signature, which nobody informed you. I got a pink for misconduct. One more and I'd have been fired.

That was typical behavior. That's really when you looked up and said, okay, you're here every day. I never called in sick, I was there every day. And they're willing to do this to you? It was like the light bulb went on, as they say. Wow, what will they do to people who've been here forever?

My parents were big union supporters. They were part of the FFAW, that's in the FBI plants. They went on strike. At one point they were on a 6 or 8 month strike. I was only 4 or 5 years old. It was hard, and we all survived, and they got everything better in the long run. They got their benefits, higher wages, and all that good stuff. They still to this day have a great contract in the FBI plants in Newfoundland.

My first knowledge of it, I was working in the plant for 2 months. Then done a drive to get signatures. At the time my sister's fiancé, he was still a lead hand, but was going to have the next management job. So he told them to get out. What I did, he came and I talked to him one night, because they used to work some overtime. I talked to him, and I signed up. I'm like, ya sounds great. That attempt didn't go through. Then the next thing you heard about it was back last year in the early summer months, they were coming

around again. It was a guy from Newfoundland who came to my door. We chatted for 3 hours. I signed the forms, ya you're right, we do need a union.

Oh ya, he came by my house. It was summer, we were having a barbeque. He sat and had a steak and everything with us.

They tried to sugarcoat stuff and say, oh this is good and that's good. They'd come up with a couple of proposals they were showing. Oh this is what we can afford. Then you have people who are of mixed minds. Personally, I was of a mixed mind at first. I didn't know, maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't, back in July. The plant has continued to brainwash people to think, maybe this is not the best thing. Maybe this is the best thing. The thing that really opened my eyes back in August was that I got suspended for 2-1/2 weeks for a 5 day suspension. They didn't know if I was going to be fired, they didn't know what they were doing with me. If it wasn't for Archie Duckworth I probably wouldn't have a job right now. The 2 people, me and the girl who was involved, the 2 of us walked in and they're trying to say, oh no, we weren't going to fire you. Being a lead hand at the plant, I know what termination papers look like. My boss walked into human resources with 2 termination papers in his hand. He walked out of the office. When he seen Archie there, he walked out of the human resources office, went out in the office, shred the papers, and walked back in again with no papers in his hand. So that was what really opened my eyes, okay, the union is good. This will help people in these situations. Back in the time I was talking about, when they gave me the prearranged day. She wrote me up for the no call no show. This time they had their DRC system in the plant. I went and pled my case to the workers, and they're just looking at you like, it was your fault because you were supposed to know.

What was your reaction to the government intervention in the strike?

I gotta watch my language here. Personally, I think it was a crock. Why were we an essential service in July when it was prime barbeque season, that we couldn't go out on strike. The premier thought it was so necessary that we should be in that plant. Give it 3 months and we'll come out with this wonderful contract for you guys. So hopefully the 2 of you will agree on it. Oh please agree to it, because this will be wonderful for everybody. They come back with this wonderful contract back in September. Sure the

union population voted for it 90%. Tyson looks at it, oh vacation 4%. I'll lose \$1000 on everybody's vacation, that can't happen. Oh short term back to 4 days, well that can't happen. Paying out too much money. This contract is \$1.9 million why they wouldn't settle, but these new roads their building and all of that stuff, and the losses the company have made, that \$1.9 million have been lost over and over in these 3 weeks.

Which new road would you like to talk about, the long one, or the 13 entrances they put into it? One of those entrances are under a no fly zone. But yet the county and even the RCMP haven't done anything to say, we can't have cars and people standing under the no parking for the fly zone. They built 13 entrances to one road, so their people could get in quicker. Those 13 entrances, that \$1.9 million is right there in gravel. It's all new, all of that is new gravel. They bring in Smiths Trucking every day and dump a new load of gravel. You keep doing that, there's \$1.9 million one day, there's \$1.9 million the next day. This contract should've been settled in a day, after they lost their profits. They keep saying, oh we can't afford this \$1.9 million. Well boy, you just did into the new roads you put out there for your people to get in quicker. They say, we're concerned about our picketers, they're still our team members. They're not concerned about their picketers. If they were, they would have the \$1.9 million in the contract instead of in dirt.

Any other province in Canada, this would not happen. I believe BC and Quebec have anti-scab laws. If this was Newfoundland, this 3 minute thing would never happen. Nobody would get into that plant, absolutely nobody. This 3 minute thing just blows my mind. The government has stepped in and said, oh you can only stop them for 3 minutes. I have to laugh too. The prime minister has always said, oh I would never cross a picket line. Here's his government inspectors, the provincial government, legislated them back to work. Guess what, Mr. Martin, you're their boss. You can easily say, no, they're provincial, you're federal.

They tried to say it's violent. The first 3 days were probably the best and the worst. My first experience of actually being on strike. The first day the bosses were being stopped. It was like wow, this is cool. You're getting overwhelmed and stuff. Then the second day when they came across the cornfields on the buses you were like, that tells you how much

they really care about their team members' safety, when they're willing bounce them across the cornfield to bring them into the plant. Then that night comes. I'm home and I can hear sirens. I'm like, oh god what's going on out there. Next thing I hear, a bunch of supervisor gets off a bus and starts beating picketers. It's like, okay nothing was done about that, or not to my knowledge was anything ever done about that. Then the next day comes, the bosses are stopped, production don't go. Then that night, they were trying to give Doug's papers or something is the rumor, they run him off the road. I don't know about you, but to me that's attempted murder. When you're running somebody off the road, going 100 km an hour down the highway, it's bad enough to hit an animal at that speed, let alone you got cars trying to box you in and run you off the road. It was like, oh my god. These people won't stop at anything. Obviously they pretty much tried to kill the man. So will they stop at nothing to make sure this union is out?

Well this community never did have any support to the union. I'll use a quote off CBC, the national program they had on. Those 2 guys who were at Brooks said, it is a redneck town. I don't know how they defined a redneck town. To me a redneck is not somebody who's very intelligent. I don't know if they want to put Brooks on the same level as that, but pretty much it is. And they don't support the union. This has primarily been an oil town, where people have just come and go. Now you've brought this big plant in here, every body has moved in. Now they're settling down, and Brooks is their home. There's more people who have immigrated to Brooks than what are actually from Brooks, who live in this town. So people have settled here, and now Brooks is their home and they want to make it better for them and their children.

My whole ? look after 2 picket groups at 2 of those back gates. All of my crews were Newfie. There is a lot. They want to way it's all Newfoundlanders and all the white people are going in – it's not. Come out and have a look. Just don't look at the main gate at the picket line, because there's more. There's 13 roads Lakeside have built in the back since 3 weeks have came. You've got people all back there, all out in front, and all over the place. Before you judge and say, oh there's these many people here and this is what they are, look at the whole picture. Just don't look at a quarter of it.

They tried to make it seem like it was a race issue. There is no race issue here. This is what is great about this town and about Canada, is the diversity. You've got different cultures here, different cultures there, and they all mix together. They honestly make one happy family. This is the way Canada is, this is the way it's been founded. No matter where it is, if it's from Newfoundland or Vancouver Island, this is from one end right to the other.

In that plant there is nothing Canadian about it. Only the cattle that go in there, and the people who work there. That is the only Canadian thing about it. This is an American company, and they tried to Americanize the Canadians that's in there. But unfortunately that doesn't work in this country.

I guess they think money talks. I don't think money is worth jail time, but if they think it is, I think their morals are a little screwed up. But money or jail, I don't think that's a hard choice.

My sister is actually in to work. It is difficult, but like I say to everybody, we're sisters. We share the same DNA, we don't share the same opinion. We've been like that our whole lives. We've never shared the same opinion. I believe that everybody in that plant know in their hearts that they do need a union. It's just the company uses fear and intimidation to brainwash their people. That's pretty much the case what's going on right now. They think, and even the people in the town think, oh we're uneducated. I have people who work for me who have nursing and accounting degrees. The people who work in this plant are not uneducated. I have dental assistants, I even have a guy who's a physiotherapist, who has a degree in it, who works for me. People are not uneducated, as these people in the town would like to make it think. Oh these are poor uneducated slobs who come here and don't know nothing, only what Tyson shows them. This is not the case. Most of the people in that plant have an education. At least 90% have high school. That's not counting the other 70% who's got college or university degrees.

A lead hand's work is a little better than the team members. They're working with them, but they're just under management. They're the go-between between management and the workers. They go and help out where needed, either from management or they help out their team members.

I do firmly believe everybody in Alberta and everybody in Canada should know about this. Because like I said, in any other province this would never happen. I think the Alberta government needs to take a hard look at this. Mr. Klein needs to get down off his pedestal and have a look and say, oh just because he's retiring at the end of the term, don't mean the PCs are retiring when Ralph Klein retires. So Mr. Klein is going to give a really hard job to repress, excuse me, to the progressive conservatives to give them voted in. Because I have been a line towing PC member. I used to be a part of the Tory youth in Newfoundland, been a Tory my whole life. But Mr. Oberg will not have my vote next time.

I've been gone for 4 years now. I keep talking about going back to school. I may never, and this will probably be my home for the rest of my life. So this is probably where I'm going to stay and where I may or may not have kids and settle down and have a family and all that good stuff. I wanted to make sure that this town and Lakeside is equipped to treat the people right. This is the way people should live. People shouldn't live in fear. People should live and have everything they need to live in life. I know people who work out on the floor, who does night jobs. They work their 80 hours every 2 weeks and just barely bring home \$900. In Brooks itself, you rent a 3 bedroom apartment in Brooks, it costs you \$950. The wages aren't bad, but when you're looking at that aspect of it, then you're like, whoa, I've got to get 2 or 3 roommates so I can live here, because I can't do it on my own. I spent some time on the coast guard, and I know just from work experience there. They got treated like kings. That was one of my first work experiences, was with the coast guard. They were treated like kings. You thought, wow, work is like this. Then like I said I spent time with the cadet camps in Nova Scotia in HMCS Acadia. There you were even treated good, and you were in a military style camp, and you were treated good. And I know these were government positions. But it was like wow, you were

treated good. Then you come here and it's like the door is smacked in your face. Yes there's jobs hand over fist. But like I say, money isn't everything. We want respect and dignity, and that's the main thing they don't do out there. Gary Michealson.. whatever his name is, he likes to make it, oh he says, we give all of our team members respect. Why don't you spend a few weeks in the plant when it's running full tilt before you start making your accusations. It's nice for you to be in the Ozarks of Arkansas and say, oh yes, we treat our team members with all this respect and dignity. They have wonderful benefits, wonderful wages. Come spend some time up here. They don't have the guts to do it, and they don't want to. They want to stay in their little hole in Arkansas and have somebody parrot it to them so they can parrot it back to the media.

I do firmly believe nobody should be in this situation we're in right now. First contract legislation should be there. It should be there for the government, for the people. These governments keep forgetting, the people are the ones who vote them in, not these corporations. These corporations might line their pockets, but these corporations don't have a voice when they vote them in.