

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Gerry Beauchamp

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

I'm Peter Hohlbein and I've been started in the plant in 1977 and worked there till Maple Leaf shut it down in 1997.

Actually, it was in '77, so I mean there was more jobs that people at the time. So I had a silly little job and they were cutting my hours back, so I went to the plant because actually my sister worked there years and years ago and she said it wasn't too bad to work there. So I went there and got hired on the day I put the application in.

I actually started making hamburgers, hamburger patties.

We'd get the frozen meat and fresh meat and mix it up together first, then grind it. Then right from the grinder it gets put into a patty machine that forms the patties and then you fill up the boxes and away they go.

What was your pay when you started?

\$6.35 an hour. My pay was \$6.35 an hour. Oh it was great. We were one of the highest paid people in the city. We were getting a little bit more than plumbers were making.

Ya, I was in, it was called primo meats, that's where we cut the sides of beef down into portions for the restaurants.

An 18 foot band saw. It was 9 feet tall, because you've got 18 feet of band saw turning. You just rip the beef apart.

It can be. Some guys cut their hands off and their fingers off in the band saw.

That was quite a bit later. I went on to the beef boning line first. After the beef boning line, then they shut that down and I had to go to a different department. I had enough seniority to stay in the plant.

I was boning cows. So you put a quarter of the beef on the table in front of you and you take every bone out of the piece of meat. Or separate the meat and the bones. It took you about an hour to do a cow, a whole cow.

There you just used knives and hooks and just take it all apart, piece by piece. There's a technique to it, you gotta learn it.

Well you have to know which way the bones curve and where to dip your knife in and out so you don't chip the blade and stuff so you can keep going.

Well in the boning where I was, it doubled, because we used to do half a cow an hour. Then when that turnaround came, you had to do a whole cow an hour. The people did it, but that's when all the carpal tunnel and everything started developing. It's repetitiveness and going faster. You don't get to give your muscles or anything a chance to relax in between one piece to the next.

Oh definitely. Because you don't even have time to think. You almost get hypnotized with the way the line speeds went and stuff.

they had a chain that would speed the lines up. They'd crank her up. Pork cuts we were doing about 2,300 hogs a day in 9-1/2 hours. Then after Pocklington took over, they got up to between 5,000 and 6,00 hogs a day. And they didn't increase the gang.

but it was a fight all the time. They wanted their production out and you, I mean if you can't do it, you can't do it. The body can only take so much damage on it at one time. But there would be grievances coming in constantly about line speeds and stuff like that.

Then I went into the Receiving Department. The whole idea of our receiving was we were all over the whole plant. We operated the three main freight elevators as well as we brought in all the dry goods. Not the live hogs or anything, just the dry materials that you use for stuffing sausages and netting hams, and bags for the cryback machines, and stuff like that. So we'd receive them at the doors and then take them over to the elevators and they'd distribute them to the departments that needed them at the time.

It varies from department to department. The lard room was obviously hot, because they had to cook the lard and have it melted before they could package it. The canning was hot, because there was a lot of cooking up there too. You'd stuff the cans with meat and then you'd cook them. So there was probably 20 or 30 cookers going up there all the time, so that was a hot department. But other than that, then we go to the other extreme. Our

blast freezer is like -40, with a wind chill on top of it because the fans were always blowing in there. But the most of the plant usually was around 40 degrees, which is, if you're in it for 8 hours a day, it's cold. It works on the bones and the joints.

I had a shoulder injury. Had to have an operation on it. The tendon worked its way up in between the shoulder bone, so they had to cut a piece of my shoulder bone off so it could drop back down again. Repetitive work. That's what the doctor said. You're just going constantly with the same arm all the time. Being right handed, if I'm going to use a knife, that's what you do, right?

when Swifts owned it and when the government owned it as well, you were treated like a human being. You weren't just there to make the owner money. I mean that's the ultimate of any company, but they still recognized that you were a human being and you were there just like everybody else was a human being, you're there to make a living and they actually treated you like a person.

The worst of it when Pocklington was there was he hired compensation specialists to cut down on his compensation bills, so he would try to get people to stay in the plant whether they were injured or not, and say they had light duty. But in fact a lot of it wasn't light duty. They just changed the job a little bit and said, well you can handle it now. Some people got injured worse, some people just couldn't handle it. But he's the original person that started getting the light duty program in and coming down on the compensation cases, which made it rough on everybody. You get injured, you don't know if you want to go and report it because you're gonna get stuck doing the same job anyway. So a lot of people just worked injured.

It all comes down the line from Pocklington, obviously, that bucks is the number one thing. And we all know with Pocklington, that is his number one thing. So he'd tell all his supervisors and everything to get speed up. Don't increase the amount of people we need to work, but get the speed up, get the production out, we gotta make money here. It's like he didn't buy the plant just because he enjoyed being a Canadian that owned a business. He was there to start another business and try to take money from that business to help out his hockey team.

That's when I was in the pork department. I was there for a brief time. To lift neck bones, you're using a 12 inch knife, or 12 inch bladed knife, so the knife is actually about 16

inches long with the handle. You cut out the neck bone as they come by you on the line. You're doing one every three seconds. So at that speed, you hardly even have enough time to keep your knife sharp.

They did. They sped it up, not quite double, but they sped it up enough that you just, you didn't have time to really time it, but you just go. There was three of you there and you're on a little stand. That stand's got a railing around it so you can only go so far, but you'd run into each other. If one guy got a little bit behind he'd bump into you then you'd bump into the next guy. With a 12 inch knife in your hand, ya.

When they put the fourth guy on the stand, they didn't lengthen the stand, they just put a fourth guy up there. So you're closer together so you've got a better chance of stabbing the guy next to you. You've got no room to fall behind whatsoever. So if your knife is dull, you just dig it in and go as quick as you can, otherwise you run into the guy beside you.

Back in '77 when I first started, I made burgers but as well we had a slicing machine. I'll try to set it up for you. It's like the meat slicer in the butcher shop, only it's vertical. So you put three pieces of meat in it, cuz there's three tunnels in it, then the blade spins plus the meat spins at the same time. It's automatic. And the supervisor was coming up and saying to the guy that was loading it, you're not loading it fast enough. Well probably about half an hour after the supervisor was on that guy's back, he lost three fingers. They went into the blade. He sliced three fingers right off. Then later on one of the, it happened in the evening, but one of the cryback machines for the package meats that you get, the slicing bar wasn't working to cut them into individual packages. After it vacuums them all, then it cuts the packages up so you just got a little square package. They were having problems with that and nobody was thinking. He didn't shut the machine off. It was jamming. He stuck his hand in there and it cut his whole hand right off. Luckily there was somebody with first aid there, because at night there's no nurses. Usually there's a nurse at the plant. But he knew enough about first aid that he packed everything in ice and the guy got his hand sewn back on. But it's still not where he can use it as a normal hand. We're there till probably March. That's the first ESL class, then they're going to have another ESL class starting December 14th.

It was all thanks to Peter Pocklington. I'll go back a couple years before I started that. In 1984 he came down hard on us and he put a tent outside the office building right there on 66th street and lined people up and said he wanted to hire them when we went out on strike. Because we were looming a strike in '84. So that scared quite a few of the people. And the union wasn't quite ready for it yet. They weren't ready for something like that. So they accepted that two-year contract. So we had two years to build up the people to being prepared for that kind of thing and having a hard strike. The way he treated people between '84 and '86 didn't help his own situation out any. He just made them more angry. So we went out on strike in '86. Most people know about the battle of 66th Street, all the horrid things we went through there with the police and the buses and the scabs and people getting jailed and stuff like that. It just told me that the union is there for a purpose. I could probably not only learn something, but help people out by becoming involved with the union.

In '86? The very first day nothing was rehearsed, nobody knew what was going to happen. All of a sudden we see these three buses full of scabs coming towards the plant. There was probably 600 people standing in front of the gates. Without anybody orchestrating them or anything, everybody just sat down and locked arms. It was emotional to see everybody just pull together. The buses didn't get in that day. The police were pulling us apart and hauling us to jail and stuff. They backed the buses up for that day. Which was a victory. It gave everybody a reason for being there. It shows you what a union actually stands for is people being united. When you're united, nothing can hurt you.

I was on strike in '78 but I just started in '77 so I didn't really know much about what was going on and I was newly married so I ran out and got another job in '78 until the strike was over, then I came back. It was 6 weeks I think. Totally. We were out there for a solid 6 months and there was never a boring day. To put it politely, there was always something happening. If anybody said they were getting bored with the strike, I've gone out to other strike lines and supported them and stuff and it's been boring. You're just walking around. But with this strike, there was always something happening, something to do, something to help out with.

Most of the time I was coordinating right at the strike line. Making sure the strikers were there. I went to the Chief of Police a couple of times and he was telling us how we had to set up the strike line and how the injunctions worked and stuff like that. I was helping out the president quite a bit.

the way the media portrays it all the time, is that it's the union that's the bad guys. In this case, I mean even if you're not a union activist or you don't believe in unions, just think of yourself if you're in a job for anywhere from 10 to 40 years, which people were, and they try to bring in busloads of people to take your job away. Would you not fight for it? It's just natural. We didn't go out to cause violence or anything. If he hadn't tried to get the scabs into the plant, there wouldn't have been any violence.

It was, in a way. I personally didn't think we got what we could have got. With all the politics and everything going on, I'm sure that Pocklington was told, get these guys back to work, it's costing us too much money and you're not going to win. So I was sure he had another collective agreement in his back pocket if we turned that one down. But a vote's a vote, and you have to go in when the people vote that we want to go back to work. So we went back. Another hard part is he kept on some of the scabs. Try to work beside somebody that was taking your job away, taking your chances of getting better contract. Try to work beside somebody and with somebody after they've done that to you, it's tough. Oh a big one. But the people stayed together on it. It probably wasn't to their best interests, because the company favored the scabs, obviously. But they would calm down. It was extreme one way or another. You'd either totally ignore them or you'd be on their backs totally. You wouldn't physically hurt them or anything, but make life rough for them in the best way you could without them being able to pin it on you. Ya, definitely. And that's what Pocklington was trying to set up with his collective agreements. Try a two-tier pay system and stuff like that. Because he knows in numbers you conquer and divided you fall. That's what their main objective was, was to divide everybody one way or another.

... I shouldn't say regular thing, but you'd go out and have a drink. Or they'd have a crib night, then the big Xmas party. Pretty well everybody would go. Everybody knew each other, they were like family. Everybody got along. For having 1,200 people there, it was a pretty tight knit circumstances.

he was there to divide. And he was succeeding.

Well it was the closest one. So for people that lived either south or north, you were right there at work. So instead of meeting somewhere on the south side or somewhere way north or something, you'd just go to the place that's two minutes away from work.

I haven't been there for years now. But from the first time I went in there and then, cuz I wouldn't go all the time, but you go in 5 or 6 years later and it's still the same decor inside and everything. I think they're trying to keep their history there too for some reason.

I lived on the north side of the city my whole life. Ya well you could say pretty close to the plant. I was usually within 5 miles of the plant one way or another.

Ya pretty well everybody that was on the north side and worked on the north side shopped on the north side. Whether you went grocery shopping or to the mall or whatever, you'd always run into people that you worked with one place or another.

There would be small groups that would do that on occasion, like even departments. If it was a smaller department they'd get together once in awhile and have a little barbecue. At one time the union and the company got together and had a massive barbecue for everybody. We'd set up soccer games and matches and kiddy stuff for everybody who brought their kids. Then every Xmas you'd have the Xmas party, the kids' Xmas party and the adult Xmas party. They were on different weekends so everybody would get together with their kids one weekend and then the next weekend it would be without the kids type thing.

She was only there for about 5 years, but then she moved to Grande Prairie. Otherwise she probably would have still been there. Some of the women that worked with her recognized my name.

Ya it is. But that was the place to work back right from the '40s right to probably the end of the '70s. It was good money, you got treated well, got decent vacations and stuff like that.

Oh definitely. If it wasn't for the union, you wouldn't have your vacations and your being able to get treated properly. A foreman couldn't just walk up to you and say, you're fired, because you did something wrong. He'd have to come up to you and say, well this is the

way you should do it. Because the union is there and you can't just fire somebody for no reason.

Not only management, though. Every time there was a sale of the place to a new owner, he would hire a new CEO and then that CEO would call up all his old buddies that used to run plants for him in other places. Then you'd have to get to know their style of supervision all over again and learn how to deal with that type of supervision as opposed to what you were used to or finally got used to. As well, because of that, in '87, '88 they hired 2,000 people to keep 200 just in the work force. I was involved in the union at that time so I was privy to some of that type of information.

Just so many people would quit. We've had people come in and start at 7 o'clock and by coffee time at 8:30 or 9 o'clock they'd disappear, you wouldn't see them again. The pace of the work. It takes a special breed to be a meat packer, it really does. Because there's people that can't handle the kill floor situation. It is bloody and gory, and in the summer it's 190 degrees inside the kill floor when it's 80 outside.

Well they pretty well kept everybody that Pocklington had in there, except for the CEO. And that CEO that the government brought in was actually a little more humane, easier to talk to. Cuz I guess it wasn't his future job or his total commitment type thing. He wasn't going to be there for life, he knew that. So why not try to make things easier for yourself if you're not going to be there that long anyway. Why go through hell? Which makes sense. So we could communicate with him, we could settle grievances a lot easier. The speed was still there. Cuz once you've done a certain speed they're not going to allow you to start slowing down. So they had to keep that up. But it wasn't as tense as when Pocklington owned it.

It was pretty well hell right from the start. When Burns came in and took over, it was pretty well hell right from the start. At that time I was the chief steward in the plant, so we knew that the government was basically just handing it over to Burns. Being involved in the union, we also talking to the international union and stuff, they know how Burns treats people and how they handle their bargaining and stuff like that. So the very first step was part of their deal was that we keep a 3 year standstill agreement or Burns wouldn't buy the plant from the government. In essence, the government was just giving it to them, but that's what they said. So we had a fight. It was the government and Burns

versus us, the union, which was a 10 or 12 member board trying to convince the people that this wasn't the way to go. Let's tell the government straight out that if Burns wants to take it over they gotta sit down and negotiate with us. And the government had all the TV news special announcements and everything about the plant will shut down if we don't accept it. It ended up to be an only 58% vote in favor of keeping the collective agreement. So in my own mind it was a victory for us because of what we were battling against.

They brought their own people in then of course. Then the biggest, ugliest thing I guess was if you had to go to the washroom they would deduct the time you went to the washroom off your cheques. We battled that too, but to no avail. Because Burns already had it in the contract in Winnipeg.

Probably about like talking to a wall. They were in the transition of getting bought out by Maple Leaf. So they went through all the motions and the negotiations and we argued back and forth. But they would never settle with anything. Then after quite a few months of trying to negotiate with them they turned around and said, well negotiation is done because we're no longer the owners.

Pretty well like everybody else. It comes across the news. They told us the same day that they put it into the news.

There wasn't much changes. He started getting rid of some of the top end people out of the office, which was nice to see. But Michael McCain himself came and talked to the people and his very first statement that came out of his mouth let us know exactly where he was. He said, profits are number one. Then he turned around and tried to say, well but I'll treat you like family, blah, blah, blah. If you read the family history of the McCains, well that doesn't give us much hope.

The way Maple Leaf was set up, they had a main grievance person in Winnipeg. So prior to McCain, if you had a grievance you would have your first and second and third step of the grievance in the plant. More times than not, a decision was made at that level, whether to go on to a fourth step or to settle the grievance. When Maple Leaf came in, there was no such thing. If you had a grievance, you'd sit down and grieve it with the parties involved and whoever the company wants there. Then nobody could make a decision. So it was like you're wasting your time in the first and second step, because you

couldn't have a third step of the grievance until this fellow from Winnipeg came to Edmonton, which was once every 2 weeks or something. Then they'd sit down and have all the third steps. Then he still wouldn't give you a decision. If you go back to Swifts there, compared to Maple Leaf, the Swifts are you might get one arbitration case in five years. In the McCain era we had 40 arbitrations plus in less than a year. So that's the total different management styles right there.

... he threatened us. When you get threatened time and time and time again, either accept this garbage or we're going to shut down, you get fed up with it. People were just fed up. They said enough's enough. Either shut it down then, or sit down and actually negotiate with us.

I think I pretty well covered most of my time in there.