

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: George Matychuk

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

My name is George Matychuk. I have 40 years and 3 months service, and I retired in '94. In the fall of '53, ya.

I was truck driver that summer in '53. When the job shut down I phoned around and I phoned the plant. The guy wanted to see what I was like. He said, ya we're hiring right now. They were actually hiring for lugging beef at that time. So when I came in there they looked at me and said, you're a little too light for that job, but we'll put you in the Poultry Department. At that time they were killing turkeys and chickens there. So they made me a packer, I was packing them in boxes. That was my first job in the plant.

Then by Xmas time they had laid me off because it was just seasonal. In the spring they called me back in May, and put me in the Sausage Department. So I worked there because wieners were really going strong that time of the year. So I worked there the summer and then when the fall came again I went back to the poultry for awhile. Then I was transferred to the pork trimming, and that's where I started there. I worked there till '56 and then I got transferred to canning and I stayed there in canning ever since.

Well, of the jobs I did in canning for 20 years, I was formulating meat for the canned meat, like grinding and stuff like that. Then about the last 15 years I was doing the pressure cooking, cooking the thing up.

The can gets sealed before it goes into the cooker. It's under pressure. It won't explode. Raw meat goes in the can and then it's put in the cooker and we tighten that thing with bolts, pressure cooker. We used to cook 700 cans in one cooker at one time. They'd cook for an hour 10 minutes or so. Then you have to chill it too. It depends how you chilled it,

like you said, might bust a can. You had to always keep the pressure in, hold the pressure at the right.

Well, start with power jeeps came in. We never had no power jeeps. We used to move the product by hand jeeps and pulling it whatever, carts you know. Then when the power jeeps came in, that took the load off the people, it was a lot better. So that's one thing. Air hoist came in. Like for instance these baskets that they used to cook 700. Well we didn't have to push them off a truck or anything back into the cooker, we hoisted them. That was much easier then. That's a lot better.

Well actually it was a little easier on us. We didn't have to do all that pulling and lifting heavy lifting. But as well, the production was increased by that. A lot of production was increased by these power jeeps and stuff like that.

I would say so, pretty well. We always had something to look forward to.

Oh ya. There was quite a few German boys, there was Dutch people came in. They come different years, I don't know for what reason. I guess it was leaving their country or something that made them coming in like that. There was a mix of nationalities, everybody in there.

I would say more modern machines and stuff, high tech machines and stuff like that.

Well when I got at the plant there, I had friends that were working on construction, I was making bigger money than they were. Then it was seasonal for them, where I had it winter and summer right through. So at that time it was okay. We were better than the guys outside with no skill work or anything, just ordinary labor. But that started to changed probably in the '70s or so. At that time we had signed a contract for 3 years. The changes came over and that's where we dropped back a lot, got behind.

I guess from about 1973 I believe it was that we dropped back from other laborers.

I would say they were, the company tried to keep everything under control pretty well. They had safety people from the working class people and the office staff that they had meetings once a week or so. I would say they kept it pretty good that way.

Oh ya. One particular one we had a bad one. A lady had lost her fingers. That was a bad one. But it's one of those things. I don't think you could blame anybody. It's just something went wrong and that's what happened.

Well ya, the work was more or less the same. But he was always wanting, instead of hiring more people he would, at one time there people were getting a lot of overtime. Cuz I guess it made a difference to him. Then he took some of our long weekends away, like holidays. He'd keep the plant open and just let 10% of us from the department go out. That made a difference. When we were at Swifts at the beginning, I know when I started there, long weekends come up there, the company would put a note on the bulletin board to clean up the place and leave it safe, and enjoy your long weekend. That's the thanks they gave us, and they let us have our holidays. But when Pocklington came along, that was a different story. He says, this is business, we gotta work. I didn't fancy that too much.

Well I don't know what you mean really. The union is always behind with everything you know. I believed in the union from the day I walked in there. If it wasn't for the union, for instance I can tell you one thing about that. When we started there, I had to buy my clothes. You have to wear white close, you had to buy clothes. During our negotiations union agreement, we got down to pay half, then finally we got to where the company is paying all the clothes for us. It kept on going on everything like that. What we could get, we used to get more holidays. When I started, before I got my 3 weeks holiday it probably was about 8 years or something. I can't remember really, but right now you get 3 weeks holidays I think when you start. It was 20 years I was here before I got 5 weeks holidays. It was just that the union was always fighting for that negotiations.

No, not really, because I was just a young fellow and I wasn't in the work force too much besides driving a truck and working in the bush and stuff like that.

About 12 blocks, just east of the plant there, off 50th St. & 21st Ave. I still live there right now. When I was buying a house, that's where I chose to buy. Close to the plant, so if I even have to walk. Because when I started at the plant I lived on the south side, and transportation wasn't that good. I didn't have a car and I had to take the bus. There was a lot of times when 3 buses went by before I got on it. That was a lesson for me when I was buying a house, buy one close to work.

Quite a few, ya.

Well, I got a few neighbors that are still around there that worked in the plant, just a block away or so. We meet occasionally and talk and meet in the malls and stuff like that.

No I wouldn't say so.

Us guys did. Especially if we had to work on Saturdays, we always went out and had a social drink and stuff like that. The closest bar around. Cromdale or Transit, Crest. But that thing went out. I haven't been doing that for a long time.

Well guys that really made a habit of doing that, on occasion I used to go when I was younger. I know myself guys who had that habit of going all the time. The Transit was a short walk and they were there.

Just as being a shop steward in the department, probably about 8 years. In the late '80s, or the '70s. I wouldn't say there's a difference. We didn't have too much trouble in our department, it was pretty good. I got away easy.

Well, like I said, I got away quite easy there and I never did have any big issues. Nothing that I couldn't settle with the people in there. I can't really explain what you want to know. Yes you're right in that. In my last years of being shop steward there, the foreman would come to me and just tell me his troubles. He says, I'm going to have to do this and this, could you talk to the guy? We had a lot of those occasions, you know. So I would sit down with the guy and talk and they'd kind of ease off and wouldn't go to any big troubles.

Well we went through 3 strikes. The first one I believe was in '76. It was only 6 weeks I believe we were out. So I walked the picket line then. Then we had another one in '78 I think, where we were locked out. I just took up another job. I was able to work, so I didn't go on the line at all. Then in '86, that was the big one. Well I was there all 6 months. I was checking people off in the office. I didn't walk on the line. It took quite a few guys to work inside, checking in and checking out.

Was the 1986 strike different?

...you'd better believe it was a different one. It was a tough one in '86 that we had there. We still talk lots about it. I got a video at home that's off that part of it. A lot of times when I get together with my friends we got lots to talk about that. Lots of laughs and lots of everything. But it was a tough one.

Well, the laughs were what some guys would pull off on the strike. Well okay, one instance we really had a laugh at is we were walking along the fence there and this guy comes walking from the Transit there, picks up a picket sign, walks up with us to the

gate, puts the picket sign in and walks into work there. That was a replacement worker. Well that was a big joke so we still laugh about that. That taught us to watch the signs. We had to make sure that nobody got a hold of signs unless they. It was a joke on us. Well ya it was, because people always worried what's gonna happen next. Because it was ? in that plant for quite awhile. In the earlier years, once you had 5 years seniority you didn't worry about it, you had the job. But ? you were in rough waters, didn't know what was happening. Especially when Burns took over. And when Maple Leaf took over, well I wasn't there already.

Well earlier we talked about socializing with the people there. We always had the union used to throw Xmas parties, banquets. The credit union had a banquet. There was always something to look forward to meet and socialize with the people that way. That petered out towards the end there, there wasn't much to look forward to.

Well just being a member. Ya. Capital Savings had a branch in there. And now that the plant is closed, they moved into Beverly. Our manager is in the Beverly branch.

Those are my pay slips I had. Somehow accidentally from the start, kept saving them, throwing them in the drawer. Then I figured, hey I better save these, see how many I can collect. So I've been collecting them from when I started in '54, and I got all my pay slips in there. So the long ones there, you'll find out that they were in our envelopes with the cash in it when we used to get cash at work. One incident I remember with that cash going around is just before Xmas, the company decided to pay us with \$2 bills. On those \$2 bills they had serial numbers taken off, and the guys that had that number get the ham or whatever. But the bank had moved up because some guys got as many as 3 hams in one package. So it wasn't what it was supposed to be. Whenever I look at those slips it reminds me of those \$2 we got at pay check, all in \$2 bills.

