

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Wally Shaw

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

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WS: I'm Wally Shaw. I belong to the Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Local 1 of Edmonton.

Q: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

WS: I was a local Edmontonian, educated in a north end public school. In my time, a grade 8 or 9 education was considered a fairly decent education. So most of us were quite happy to get grade 9 and go to work. We weren't affluent people from the north Edmonton community, but we all had decent livings. My father was a veteran of the First World War. He was a milkman for years. He loved the milk trade. He loved people. He thought that was the best job a person could ever have. But as a boy, I helped him a few times and knew that wasn't going to be my calling, out there in the cold and driving the horse so long to sell a couple of quarts of milk. I started off as a warehouse boy for a

stationery company. That was my first job. We're talking about 1949, I guess. One day, there was a building being erected behind where I worked. I noticed these masons working there and the helpers throwing the bricks up. In the old days they used to throw them up with a paddle, and somebody on the scaffold would catch them. I got talking to one of the fellows and asked him how much they made. At the time he said they were making \$1.90 an hour. I was working for about \$17 a week. It didn't take me long to figure out the difference in the wage scale. I didn't realize how you got a job doing this. Come noon hour I jumped on my bike and hustled down to the apprenticeship board. I happened to meet a man there by the name of Sam Whittacker, who was a very nice man. He informed me this wasn't the way to get an apprenticeship. I'd have to go to a contractor and get them to indenture me, and then he would do the rest. But I guess he took a little pity on me, being so young. He said, just a minute, I'll make a few phone calls. So he phoned around and said, guess what. I've got a contractor that'll indenture you. That was C.H. Whittam, who are no longer in business, but was a good general construction firm in those days. So I went back and resigned my position as a warehouse worker and went to work as an apprentice bricklayer. I did find that I liked that type of work, and I liked the people that I worked with. They were very interesting. They were all a bit of the old country, Scotch and Irish and English, until after the war when we got a lot of immigration. Then we got a lot of German and Dutch and some Scandinavian people into the trade. But before that it was pretty much the British Isles people. They were very easy to work with, very willing to teach you. I was assigned to one particular tradesperson, and it was his job to make me productive. It was a good era. About that time they were starting to come in with some hording for the winter months, and were

starting to build larger buildings on the university campus where we could work 12 months of the year. We made quite a decent living. Wage-wise, I don't think you could've talked me into another job. Little did we realize at the time, we had no pension plans and things like that that come into effect later on.

Q: What was it like being an apprentice?

WS: As an apprentice, you did pretty much as you were told. The masters told you whether it was good enough. If they didn't think I was doing a good job, it wasn't above them to just kick it over and say, re-do it until it's proper, which I don't think would happen on today's market. But at that time it did. I think they had a lot more pride in their craft right up until probably 1975. Then we got into sub-contracting and production. In my time I never seen a young foreman. It was always a man probably 60 that was your superior. That did change. I was probably a foreman by the time I was 28. Things did change that way. Being a foreman for a general contractor was much easier. You really didn't have to be too intelligent. You just made sure your men were there and working. There was somebody else doing all your line snapping and all your brainwork for you. Then when we went to subcontracting, we found out we also had to have this ability to do all this work ourselves.

Q: When did that happen?

WS: It started probably in the early '70s, where the general contractor, rather than have us employed on his payroll, they started sub-letting the work to individual people. So if you thought you were smart enough to estimate the quantity and price of installation on any certain job, go ahead and give the general contractor a price. If he accepted it, it was up to you to look after your own crew, which I believe started over in Europe long before it did

here, and in the US also. It did eventually work its way up here. So nowadays it's all subcontractors. Everybody's an individual. They do nothing else. They do only masonry. What I grew up with, the masons, the carpenters, the labourers were all lumped into one group. They always did subcontract electrical and plumbing, but the rest of us were all working for one firm, the general contractor.

Q: How did you get to be involved in the union?

WS: That's a long story. The president of our local in 1951 was a gentleman by the name of Frank Silk. We were 100% unionized in Alberta, let alone just Edmonton. You did not lay a brick unless you were a sworn union member. I was indentured in 1951. In 1953 I was selected off the floor of the union hall to go learn how to negotiate wages. They thought eventually some of the younger people were going to have to do this. So I went to my first negotiating meeting when I was in my third year as an apprentice. I've only missed two or three negotiations since. Being a union member, I just seemed to go from that on to a third vice president, then second, then first, then eventually president. That was 25 years ago I guess. It was just something I found interesting. At the time, I didn't know if my son was going to follow in my footsteps. I just did it because it seemed like the right thing to do at the time, fight for the rights of the members as low as myself. But since, my three sons have also followed my traits, although I tried to discourage them. They enjoy doing it and make a very good living at it, much better than I did. And there's always nice little perks about being the president of the union. You get to go to all the golf tournaments.

Q: What were some of the ups and downs that happened in the construction industry?

WS: The first tough time would be probably 1957. There was a big of a slowdown. I'd just gotten married. I went to work for the Alberta Government, thinking this was the thing to do because it would be much safer as far as employment was concerned. As it turned out, they were the first ones to cut their crew. Then the firm I was working for said, that's too bad. You quit, so you suffer for a little while. So I didn't work most of that one winter. I did take employment on a water-drilling rig, and that taught me a very valuable lesson about unionism and about human nature.

Q: What did it teach you?

WS: That I wasn't working under such severe conditions at any time that I thought I was. Because when I got out in that oilfield I found out what rough things were and some of the conditions them people worked under. I worked for one week, and when it come time for my turnaround, I come home and told my wife, if I never work again for the rest of my life, it won't be in the oilfields. So I waited for another two months until the masonry opened up again, and I was never out of work again.

Q: How does the Bricklayers union hall assign work to its members?

WS: We do not have a list system in our union. The only time we use a list system is we do ask the members if they're unemployed to phone in so we can have their names. Then if anything does come through the hall, we use it accordingly off the list. At times, contractors will call, especially in the refractory, will call for people on any given day. We never know when it's going to be. Then we use that list. But other than that, the men solicit their own work from the contractors of their choosing and most of them do find one or two contractors that they're satisfied with, and that's who they'll generally put in their time with.

Q: What is the refractory?

The refractory, that's the two phases we have in our union. There's the red bricklayer that does outside work. The refractory worker does a lot of smokestacks, furnaces, acid proofing. They get very busy at times and we have trouble supplying them at times. But the last couple of years we've been fortunate. We've had very little unemployment at any time. I think they're all doing quite well. Keep our fingers crossed it stays that way.

Q: Which contractors do you have agreements with?

WS: Well we have the agreements with just about every contractor in the city, that they have to follow the agreement. We get the remittance of course for their health and welfare, their pension, things like that. We pretty much know where every member is at any given time if we want to look them up. We encourage them to phone in and let us know where they are working, which of course, when they're really busy, they don't bother doing. But that's human nature. You only call a union when you're out of work and need a job.

Q: Are all the workers who work for the contractors you have agreements with covered by the agreement?

WS: You're supposed to be, or within a certain amount of days we expect them to let us know that they're on their payroll. According to our agreement, they should let us know so we can speak to the member and ask him if he wishes to join. Of course, if he doesn't want to join, he no longer works for that contractor. I don't think you call that closed shop. Closed shop is when we don't allow anyone in. So there's a difference there.

Q: Do you recall any strikes?

WS: We did have one strike in '74. It didn't last long, maybe a week and a half. I'm not sure how that came about. I don't remember our demands. I don't think I was on the negotiating committee that particular year, so I don't think I could tell you. But it wasn't long and it wasn't bitter. It was just one of those little strikes. On the second go-around the men accepted whatever the offer was. It must've been about improved something. They were quite adamant in those days. Other than that, until they got into the '80s when the contractors started double-breasting and rolling back.

Q: What is double-breasting?

WS: That would be a contractor that, say I've got Shaw's contracting, then I just change the name a little to another contractor, but I still use my original men and I don't pay them union wages or I don't pay them any of the benefits the union has negotiated for them. Plus probably roll their wages back, which they did. We lost ground. I was working on the Manulife Building, the last building I was on. We were getting \$18 something an hour, which at the time was a decent wage. When we finished that job, there wasn't a job in this city that you could get. The job I finally accepted was \$15.25 an hour, so I rolled back \$3 an hour. I felt very bitter about it. But there were people working for \$9. We were somewhat bitter at the contractors for some time. But they found out it didn't work any better for them than it worked for us. The disorganization, because we weren't going to supply, we weren't going to look at them. Then they started cutting their own throats to get work. They didn't know whether they could get a crew for \$9 or whether they could get a crew for \$15. Instead of working under a union agreement where everybody knew you had to pay \$15. Yes, I think they came to their senses also, in the next year or so. Didn't mean it made it easier for us to negotiate with them. But we have made up ground

very well in the last six years. We're at a level playing field right now, I think, although I've been retired for some years. But I've never seen the kind of money these younger people are making.

Q: Did you lose a lot of members at that time?

WS: It didn't really disintegrate. I think everybody realized they had to stick together somewhat. What we did find was people were forced to go to work for whatever they were offered. Some were as low as \$9. People had to still work. But we didn't have a dues structure quite as high as what we have now. We didn't have the same format of collecting the dues either. A member would come in and pay what he could. If he was having a tough time or out of work, he doesn't pay as much, just a token. We almost went bankrupt. When I took over as president, we were in the hole by \$26,000. Today we own a building, have a healthy bank account, and I don't have to sweat about paying the staff anymore.

Q: Talk about the pictures you've brought with you.

WS: That's a school in northwest Edmonton. It's kind of nice. It's got some architecture to it. It might be one of the schools they're talking about closing down now, which is a bit of a shame. It's quite old. Brick and block are still popular here in the north. You wouldn't find any fancy masonry like this hardly at all anymore. Most of it, on any of the newer schools, they seem to be going to block. There's some design to it, but nothing as intricate as the old type of masonry that you could look at and say there was some work put into it. That's St. Joseph Cathedral on 97th street and 7th avenue. This is probably something you'd expect to be built in Europe somewhere, because of the colour combinations, even in the masonry. You'd very rarely find this in another building in this city or in North

America probably. I'm not sure who the architect was. Probably the most interesting architect would be Cardinal. He designed some beautiful buildings. The legislature building here in Edmonton, it's basically made of stone, probably a type of sandstone. This is also erected by bricklayers and stonemasons. There was no crossover between the two crafts at the time this was erected. You could do it whether you were a bricklayer or a stonemason. The stonemasons probably had preference on the outside of these buildings. The bricklayers probably did a lot of the backup work. But they would do some of the actual setting too. The stonemason would do all the cutting of the stone. It's been repaired and looks as good today as it ever did. That's a government house, a type of sandstone again. It's got some half decent architecture about it. It looks just about as nice today as it did when it was originally built. It's been well maintained. The people we have to impress are the architects and people that are designing these buildings. I think our contractors would love to do work like this, and I know our members would. That's Holy Trinity Church on the south side. It's made out of clinker brick, which used to be the brick that was over-burnt in the kilns at the time. At first they thought it was useless. Then somebody decided they could build out of it and beautify a building. As you can see, they do. Of course you don't burn brick the same as we used to in the kiln, so there hasn't been clinker brick produced since the early 1900s. But there are quite a few buildings and homes around that are still built out of it. It's so hard that it would last for hundreds of years. That's the Arlington Apts. on 100th Ave & 104 St. It was originally built in the early 1930s. I did do some work on it myself in 1955. All these little arches you can see there were disintegrating. I took them out and replaced them, and I believe it's still standing in fairly good shape to this day. This is a tower built at a pulp mill. I

can't see which mill we were at, but these are built out of acid resistant tile. They hold chemicals and pulp and things. These are built 16 inches wide so you have a tile on the outside and a tile on the inside. The tile on the inside is your acid proof tile. The tile on the outside is just ordinary tile. They go up two feet at a time. They're poured solid with concrete. Everything in there, even the ceiling, is made out of an acid-proof tile. I've been on them as high as 140 feet.

Q: Is mason a type of brick?

WS: No, a mason's a mason. It is a different type of material. It's not a mortar material you use to build these things. This is strange. I'm not telling you correctly. The outside is a mortar material, the inside is an acid proofing material. The average bricklayer would take two or three days and you're doing this type of work. Some people that specialize in it are better than others. There are people, refractory workers, that specialize in doing this type of work. This is Grant MacEwan College, which I think is an attractive building. Our members would be involved in all the red areas. That's all masonry. There are some stone areas, not pictured here, but they'd be doing that too. The towers are concrete, which we had nothing to do with. But it is an attractive and well-designed building, I think. Something the city can be proud of.

Q: Do you think things are worse today than they used to be for unions?

Oh very much so. I would say the labour laws were very much against the trade unions. They allowed double breasting for one thing, and that was terrible. They keep talking about right to work legislation, which would be disastrous. Now it's almost impossible to get on strike, which is one weapon the working person has. But the way the labour laws are lumped together, no. You have to get 75% of the unions that you're lumped in with in

order to get yourself out on strike. The contractors know that, and their negotiators know that, and they're very professional people. You're putting professionals up against trades people when it comes to negotiation. We take our members off the floor. They're no more intelligent than me when it comes to labour law or anything. It's a struggle. I'd say it could be made easier and a fairer playing field for all of us.

Q: What are you most proud of in terms of your involvement with the union?

WS: I believe our pensions and our health and welfare are probably the thing I would be most proud of. We now have a pension plan. The younger people are going to be fairly well looked after and live decently, compared to the older ones. Our older members had to retire with \$300 or \$400 pensions. Our younger people are going to be much better off. Our health and welfare helps families that need to be helped, not as much as we would like maybe, but we're helping them. We pretty much keep our people employed, and we watch what we do. It think we do quite well.

Q: When did your members first get a penion?

WS: We never started a pension in our union until 1977. We started with 25 cents a worked hour. We presently put in \$5.50 per work hour. A member can get a year and a half credit for every 1800 hours he works. It's not too hard to work 1800 hours in this day and age because there's all kinds of work out there. We can have a member at 50 years old with a paid up pension, which I think is really nice. It gives them the independence of either working themselves to death in the last 12 years, or they can go out and say hey, I'm going to work 1000 hours a year from now on in the summertime and I'm not working in the winter if I'm not feeling well. And I think we have a decent wage for them nowadays.

Q: Is there benefits to being affiliated with an international union?

I think there are certain benefits. Like your president's contract, which you use in the industrial field, is generally settled by an international union. Without being affiliated with the international union, we might find ourselves in a lot of trouble on one of these big projects. I think we begrudged the amount of money they demanded for years.

There's been a lot of unrest in our sister locals in Ontario. The international has had a tough time in Ontario. They've come to a happier understanding with the rest of us now. So we don't begrudge what we pay them anymore. It's been cut back substantially, and I believe it's a benefit to the members.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

WS: I think you pretty well got it covered. I hope this is of some help to you. Thank you for having me.