

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Lena Shellian

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

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Location: Canmore, AB

Index: Canmore historian - community - heritage preservation - volunteer work - company store - mine fire boss - silicosis - Workers' Compensation Board - tourist town - developers - Pocklington - union hall - Canmore Hotel - First of July - hockey town - Opera House

**Her background**

My grandparents came over from Czechoslovakia, coming up through the United States. My grandfather and a cousin were told that there was mining in Canada, so they came up. The cousin stayed in the Crows Nest Pass and mined there, while my grandfather came here. The oldest son was born in the States, and the other six children were born in Canmore - so my roots go way back. My father came in 1913 and started to work in the mine. He developed silicosis, or black lung, and passed away in '63. We had a good life; we were well fed, and well clothed. It wasn't stylish, but we had the essentials. We ate a lot of potatoes so we should be like little tubs. As kids, we really enjoyed the outdoors – swimming in the river, skating on the river, hiking, running around in the bush. We went to school, we walked to school and back at lunch, and then back to school, which is about 1-1/2 miles each way. That was it. I graduated and went to work in Calgary in the bank. I didn't like Calgary so I came back to Canmore and worked in the hospital. Then I got married. No I worked in a store, then I got married and raised a family. I went back to work after my kids were grown up. I'm retired now, but what is retirement when I'm as busy as ever?

**A closely-knit community**

It was a very closely-knit community. We had town side and mine side, and we still do, but everybody worked together, and there was no distinction between groups. If someone was having problems, needed something repaired, there was always someone out there that would come and help. The Catholic Church was built by volunteers, both Catholics and non-Catholics. The skating rink, when we converted to the artificial ice, everybody came out to work. Even the ladies were manning the coffeepot. It was a very close community, I have to say. Well there was the hospital, and Catholic church were two that were built that way. Whenever any of the men have time, like the mine wasn't working all that steady, they would go out and do their share. It was all volunteer work.

**The company store**

I quit the hospital and I went and asked the manager of the local store for a job. I had heard one of the clerks was quitting. I got the job and started on the order desk. Then when the miners would come home, we had to serve at the counter, because they wanted their groceries. I remember one particular time, this fellow we called Farmer came in and bought something. He says, put that on my bill. Well I didn't know what his real name was. So I had to ask one of the other fellows, what's Farmer's real name? So I do remember his name now, it sort of stuck in my head. The lady that worked in the dry goods part, that sold shoes and material and stuff, I was given the job. I worked there until I quit, I worked there 7 years.

It was a company store. They sold everything from furniture to shoes, material, groceries, tools, gas. They gave credit, and the money was taken off their paycheck, their mine check. A lot of people sold to the company store, because they had credit. If they hadn't worked enough days to cover all the other little deductions, they owed money. Then it was taken off so much a pay when things got better.

### **Her late husband and father**

His name was Andrew Shellian, and his position was fire boss, underground in the mine. He did the blasting and saw that the crew under him were okay. One particular time he came home and he was really upset, because they had fixed the face, filled it up with dynamite, but when they blasted it, he said it lit up like a Christmas tree, because of the propane gas behind it. He said it was such an experience to see. He told his men to get out.

I don't think they experienced much gas down there. But this one particular time I guess there was just, it was there when they blasted. It just lit up the face like a Christmas tree, like I said. Another time, they had a little cave in. He wanted his men out. Joe, he was terrified, one of the workers. So he shoved him up the air vent. He says he had quite a time shoving him, because he was frightened, which is only natural. But he thought that was kind of funny to have to shove him up there. His biggest concern was that if anything happened, was to get the men out fast.

Number One mine was up here behind my house a little ways. Number 2 is down by the lamp house. There's number 3, the Wilson scene. Cairns, I think there was a number 5. Japan was one of their biggest customers. During the war I remember them often talking about Petawawa down in Ontario. They sold a lot of coal down there. Then I guess with Japan going to other fuels, the demand wasn't there anymore.

My dad had silicosis. It was never diagnosed as silicosis, but I remember him coughing up black stuff. He had difficulty breathing. Andy also had silicosis. He had to go up every year to Edmonton to the Compensation Board there, and go through all these different exercises, which really tired him out. He would be up there 2 days, then he'd come home, and he was just exhausted. It took 10 years after to get a small pension from the Compensation Board. That would be probably in the late '60s when he was going up to Edmonton, and once a year he had to go. It was 10 years before he got a compensation cheque from them. They wouldn't acknowledge that he had silicosis. He spent two weeks in the Foothills Hospital isolated, because they thought he had TB, but it ended up that it was silicosis. He also had a hearing problem. He did have a hearing aid, which he found

to be a real nuisance. But he got a pension for that, which was about \$375 a month, for his hearing.

Alec Forsenko also had silicosis. He went down to the States, they sent him down there to try and diagnose it. He really had it bad. He was a stubborn person, and he did take up curling. He never curled before, didn't know anything about the game. He'd pretty well stand up and throw the rock down. Someone reported him to the compensation office. They informed him, if he continues this, he will lose his pension. It was wonderful to have him curling there, because he was fun. If the rock got half way down the ice, he thought that was great. He had us all in stitches. But there's a lot of the men have silicosis, those that have worked in the mine. If they were checked, I'm sure they must have traces of silicosis.

### **Her role as town historian**

I don't know how it started, but I've always been interested in our heritage and I'd like to preserve as much as possible. Anything I can do to help, I'll be right there. They can call on me any time to do something, whatever they need doing. I've met a lot of wonderful people and have worked with the Museum. It's been very interesting. Over the years, with all the questions that have been thrown at me, it's triggered a lot of memories that you don't think about during the day. It's been exciting. I've taken groups away on hikes up to Number One mine, because they wanted to know where it was. So I've taken them up there and we've had good discussions up there. One lady from Toronto said, you know Lena, I envy you growing up here in this beautiful valley. You tell us what you did and what you do here. She says, I really envy you. I grew up in Toronto, she said, and we didn't have the space that you have here. So it made me feel good.

The pictures - we had all these pictures donated, so I had to put the accession number on, which was interesting, because I had a chance to look at the pictures too, and put them in different files. From there, whatever they want done, I'll be more than happy to go there and do whatever. I am going to work on the pictures. There are many missing. I would like to put them in the albums, and do that. Mary Beth, I mentioned it to her and she says anything you need I'll be more than happy to get it for you.

### **The mine closing and community**

It was a miner's town. There's so much history going back and there's so much we don't know yet. We don't have the people around anymore to tell us, so we have to dig it up somehow. It was a very peaceful town, but a very active town. Hockey was the thing. It's history that is very interesting. When you start talking about it or you have people talking about it, it's interesting to hear what they have to say, and how Canmore was. It was a friendly town, an active town.

Now, it's getting to be too much of a tourist town. We're having problems with parking in Canmore. I mentioned it to the mayor that we need parking or downtown Canmore will die - I said in five years. With so many old timers moving out of Canmore, we're losing our history. It's too expensive to live here, and many would rather commute from Cochrane. That's what's happening. A number of my friends have already moved.

When the mine was working, we had the company houses. There were enough to house a lot of them. Now those houses are all gone, and we have a lot of development where the

mine was. It's very crowded, with high rise buildings. It's just expanding too fast. It sort of hurts me to see all this expansion in areas that I used to hike and walk and pick berries.

For a number of years before the mine closed we would hear, the mine was going to close. We should've been prepared for the closure, but when it happened, it was a shock, a real shock to the whole community. The miners were depressed, you could just feel the depression and thoughts of, "What am I going to do now?" Lafarge and some of the businesses in Banff were very good to take people out there working, so the men could sign up for jobs in these areas. Lafarge was very good that way; a lot of the fellows went to Lafarge. But then a lot retired, the older ones especially. It took a good year for people to get over it. Then we didn't know what was going to happen to the town, whether it was going to close down or whatever.

But then the development started. It was very slow at the beginning, and then it started to build up. This is what we got now, this big expansion here. To me there's never been any plan about what Canmore was going to look like when it's built out. It's not the Canmore I know, or even what I knew 25 years ago. It has totally changed.

They sold it to, well this area here, they sold it to Peter Pocklington from Edmonton. The other area, the mine itself, developers came in and they wanted to develop, so they had to get rid of the tipple. It was like, "we gotta get this done fast." We were still in shock, so we couldn't think of preserving it. If we were in our right minds at the time, we could've thought, we should preserve this stuff. But it was gone, and it was too late.

### **The Museum**

The people that were involved in the foundation of the museum, most of them were interested in preserving our heritage. They had lived here long enough. Maybe they weren't involved maybe with the mine, but they had lived here, and they knew what it was like, when the mine was here. They wanted to preserve that as history. I think they're doing a very good job at the museum, preserving it with the pictures and artifacts that people have donated. The donations of artifacts were wonderful. They must have thousands of them in cold storage. The pictures came in. We had workers that were very enthused about it all, and worked very hard to get it going.

I think it's because of the people that are involved, that were involved to begin with, and the ones that are involved now. I think that's the biggest part there. You've got to have people that are interested in looking for the information and digging it up and preserving it.

There was Tye Smith. He tried to get some information about the Hotel. Don Garrin, I don't know what his position was, but he spent a lot of time at the museum. Eva Candy was another one that did a lot of research. Marilyn Watt was president at one time, she was interested. I can see their faces, I can't think of their names.

What's left of the town?

Well there's the old and first hospital that is still standing. It's a private home now, a bed and breakfast. No, the first one. It's downtown at the end of the main street. There are three houses just down here below me that were floated down here by river from Georgetown, which was a mining community. It was just past the Nordic Center along the River. There are no foundations or anything, there's only a monument there for the

soldiers that were killed during World War I, I think, on the river down here. The houses are just down the hill from me, at the hospital.

And then, there's the union hall that is still standing. It's being used regularly by the arts committee. See we got so few left, it's hard to remember. As to old houses, we have my neighbor here. And a little ways up further, the 3<sup>rd</sup> house up here, a big white one, that is a log house and it is over 100 years old, but it has siding on so you wouldn't know it was a log house. There is another house just off Main Street that is 100 years old. It's not well kept right now, the people haven't done much to it. I think that's about it.

I'd like to see these houses preserved. They could have them as little tea house or whatever. I talk about our heritage all the time. A lot of people ask me questions about it. I think a lot of them are interested in it. Maybe I stretch the truth a bit, I don't know. But I'm proud of having been born here and grown up here, and still living here.

The Canmore Hotel has been there forever, as far as I'm concerned. I remember it when we'd go downtown as kids. I went to school with Mary's oldest daughter. I was 21 when I went in there the first time, that was the legal age at the time. My mother found out before I even got home that night, that I was in the bar. It was the focal point downtown, because the miners would come off shift, and they would always drop in at the bar for a beer or two. Or a lot of them would go home, change, then after dinner go to the bar. It was a very busy place. I think it should be preserved because it's 115 years old. Something could be made out of it rather than tear it down. I don't like to see all the new buildings up here. It's nice to have the older ones standing around.

The union hall, that was a very busy place during the mine era. Every Friday there was a dance, and it was always packed. I had Doreen Herdetsky as a friend - I told you that her dad was killed in the mine - she loved to dance. Her and I would dance, because the boys were always afraid to ask. So her and I would dance, and I loved dancing. The school would have their Christmas concert there, each grade would have their little program. Then about half way through they'd say, oh Santa just said he's by Eckshaw, he'll be here pretty soon. So the excitement was being built up there. Then all of a sudden we'd hear the bells and Santa was there. The company donated gifts to every student in school. I have a Chinese checker board that I got one Christmas, I still have it. That was interesting the things they would have. The wist drive, and then after the wist drive they would have a dance. My husband played after years later, he had his own little band. They would play at the dances, till 1 o'clock in the morning. And the floor was always full with dancing, they loved it.

Christmas wasn't a big event, but the First of July was. We would have the parade, starting from the YMCA, which was down here. Before we started on the parade, each student was given a ticket, which we got free ice cream, chocolate bar, we'd have free ones. The band would play and lead the parade. We'd parade over to the school grounds. Then they had races from all over. I was known for the clothespin race. I was able to pick up more clothespins in one hand than anybody else.

The Union was very good that way. They donated the Christmas presents. First of July was the biggest event of the year here, and there were prizes. We always got our two bits or 50 cents if we won a race. I thought they were okay. Andy wasn't a union member, but

my dad was, and I've known everybody else that was a union member. I don't think they ever had any qualms with the union here.

In the winter, Canmore was a very hockey town. That rink, the old rink, was jam packed. When Canmore scored, my God, I'm sure the roof must've got 6 inches above. We had a few players that went to the States and play hockey. Andy Chaikowski was one, and Joe Jerwa also played in the National Hockey League. That was the biggest event. Both Andy and my brother played hockey. My brother, if there was a fight on the ice, you pretty well knew who started that fight. It was my brother. I can say that about him not, because he's gone. We would walk, it didn't matter if the snow was up to our knees, we would walk to that rink from Prospect to see the games.

[Showing a picture of mountain climbers] The 'Trail Minders' upgraded the trail up to the top of Hua Ling. That day they wanted to have a plaque put up there; that was on July 13<sup>th</sup>. So we went up to the Spray Lakes area. In the photo that's Leon Dyrigas, myself, and Diane Long. They wanted 3 members from a mining family, so that's us. The plaque was posted up there for a week, and it was stolen. So I don't know if there's another one up there or not, but some of the members were very disappointed that it disappeared so fast.

Leon Dyrigas comes from a mining family, and he also worked in the mine himself. Myself, and I worked in the company store, and come from a mining family. And Diane Long, her maiden name is Semkiw; her father worked in the mine.

The peak next to Ha Ling is called Miners Peak. You can walk over to it. Chinaman's Peak was named after the Chinese fellows who worked on the Railway. One of them said to his co-workers that he could make it up to the top and back in a day - and he did. So it was automatically named Chinaman's Peak, and that's how we know it and remember it. Miner's peak was named in honour of the miners in this town.

The big round one is Chinaman's Peak, Hua Ling. The little one over to the left, little pointed one, is Miner's Peak. The one across the gap is Rundle.

### **About Chinese workers**

There were about 6 of them living down near the mine. I don't know exactly what jobs they had, but they weren't paid as well as the white men. We knew them, and they treated us great. At Christmas time they treated us to chestnuts and firecrackers. We also had, Mera's store which was first owned by two Chinese men. Mr. Mera worked for them, and Mr. Chung's son went to school here in Canmore. I went to school with him, and found him to be a very pleasant fellow. Ah Chung always looked forward to the last 15 minutes in the morning where he would tell us a story, read his story. He used to write stories, and that last 15 minutes before noon was his time to read.

No, I don't know the name of the fellow, the one that worked for the CPR. His name was Hua Ling. He's the one that climbed the mountain and had it named after him.

[Showing a picture] This building, I only know as the Opera House, that's where the movies were played. Over the years I heard that it originally was a barn. Then they used to have an organization there that looked after horses. Everybody was trying to be an operatic singer. After that, it was a show hall. I worked there for a couple of years. We were paid \$5 a month in 50 cent pieces, so it was pretty heavy walking home with these 50 cent pieces. But there were two shows on a Wednesday and three shows on Saturday,

the matinee and two evening shows. Mr. Reynolds, he was the projectionist, he had taken us up to the room and showed us how it was shown, which was interesting. After the matinee we had to sweep the floor so that the evening show the room was clean, which was great. That was \$5 in our pocket, and that was a lot of money in those days.

I was often told, and I still laugh about it, but I was told that opera house was haunted. So we never went behind the screen, because we didn't know what to expect. Eventually they built a little apartment on the back of it. One of the fellows that worked in the store lived there with his wife for a short while. Then it was taken apart, log by log, and moved to Heritage Park in Calgary. It sits there to this day.

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