

Celanese

Sam Cholak & Tom Enright

Keywords

safety

petrochemical

divorce

community

family

SC: My name is Sam Cholak. I was employed with Celanese Canada for 18 years. I started my association with Celanese 4 or 5 years earlier through trucking. ... fell in love and married her. One day my boss said to me, why aren't you working for us? I said, I have my own business going. I said, I didn't really know you were looking for anybody. He said, we like when husband and wife teams work for us. He said, if you ever think about it, join us. About a year and a half later I decided, ya I'm done with trucking. I went and talked to human resources and wrote the tests and got hired with their loading department. That would've been 1990 that I started. In 1990 I started with Celanese, and worked till the end of 2007.

TE: I was working at a hotel in management. I got married and my father-in-law told me about this place. He said, go apply. I went and applied, and two weeks later they phoned me and said come on in. That was October 5th, 1981, the official date. I went in there as a maintenance man and stayed in the fibers unit, which was cig tow. I was there for 25 plus years. The last year and a half I spent in CA, cellulose acetate.

SC: Myself, I started in the loading department, and after about 18 months I decided that wasn't for me. I was going to leave the company, but I went into another area and ended up in cellulose acetate. It was a great place. Good guys to work with, and a very good educational experience. They taught you everything you needed to know. They took what you had for pluses and just enhanced it for you. A lot of opportunities. ... I'm just a farm boy from out of the city here, and I've got good general mechanical skill and everything. But they took advantage of everything and they saw a guy who's willing to learn, and they let me learn. Celanese was not cheap on educational funding. If you were willing to volunteer your time and do certain things, they paid for you to come in for training. By the time I was finished I had emergency medical response, fire captain, manned structure C5 for incident command. I could've been a firefighter for the City of Edmonton probably starting at a higher level.

TE: I worked in what was called cig tow, cigarette filters, we made the fibers in the filters. I started out on the bale press and within 3 months progressed up to first operator. Like Sam said, the opportunity to move from the company, move through various levels, was progression. They gave you the opportunity; if you wanted it, you took it. In the early '80s when the bust came to Alberta, a lot of people at that point had ample opportunity to move up.

SC: I think what you're referring to, that was back when if you didn't like the look of your boss you'd just tell him, up yours, and have a job the next afternoon. When you guys started, Celanese pay wasn't the greatest either, on the scale.

TE: I started at \$8.25 in October. They were negotiating at that point. Came February we got a 13% increase, so I went to \$10.25 an hour. That was 1981. After that we got into 6 negotiations, and the highest increase we ever had was 2, 2, and 2 over 3 years, which would work out to be about 4.5% over 3 years.

Q: What positions did you hold in the union?

TE: I started out as a shift steward, became an area steward, and then I was vice-president probably 10 or 12 years.

Q: What benefit was the union in the plant?

TE: When I got in there it was ECW and then it went to CEP in '91 or '92.

: But what it meant to have the union in there, you could ask the older people when they went on strike... they had a strike in the '70s that lasted quite a while, and people came back for pennies. The older crowd at work, every time we went into negotiations, they had memories in the past where they didn't like the union, because of that strike. ... During that strike, a lot of people out, they came back for pennies. Plus, and this is where some unions get a bad rap, some of the executive were promoted just recently after into management positions. That really took a chunk out of the union. ... If you look back through the old records, that was a hard time for everybody. There was opportunity for people to move, and there was people leaving at that point, so they had to fill from within. Why not have someone that was union go into a staff position? Now they'll be able to understand the staff side and the union side, and it makes for a more harmonious workplace.

SC: For the most part, I would say it worked. If you had a conscious individual in that situation, he or she could do well for you. I can see the reasoning behind it, but there's always the detractor that's going to say, oh he was just there for the money anyways. ... I think it was just a coincidence of timing. I don't think anybody ? went into management. I don't think they sold out anybody.

TE: No, but the thought process was out there, well that's what they did, he jumped the fence, he fell off the fence. You can't sit on the fence. But when opportunity arises, people will take it, it's just human nature. The union, after that little incident, that was always out there. If you got onto the executive at Celanese, and you did something for the staff side, the people would sit back and... But it took a long time to get that phase away... If you were on the executive they didn't trust you enough, that stigma...

Q: [can't hear]

TE: Yes, and Celanese gave the union ample opportunity, just like the union gave Celanese ample opportunity to help the company out by educating us through their labor movement, like sending us to steward schools. There were super opportunities. But then

there was rough times when they didn't want to. I myself went through quite the education, from stewards to leadership, public speaking (it doesn't help me much right now), and these courses. But they always gave us the time for it. But then there was times when they didn't want us to... times there were negotiations. You could always tell when it was negotiating time. Book offs, someone wanted to go to school. They also helped us out with a 3 cent ?? They implemented where it was 3 cents for every employee per hour. This was company initiated, given to the union, and the union took hold of it.

SC: I was going to say, from my perspective, I was never an executive or steward or anything, but our union stewards and executive were quite open with us. You didn't ever get the secretive idea, other than negotiations, which you can understand; they're not going to say everything that's going on in bargaining. But Celanese seemed to sit and listen too. They kept their ears perked; management listened to what the people wanted. I would say right from the beginning when they started 12 hour shifts, that was the big turnover problem too, going back to the earlier topic, was 8 hour shifts. They were sill(?) ones too: 7 days straight and then a day and a half off, then you're back Monday mornings. I wouldn't have lasted. But management listened to the union, and they listened to the workers. They did change that when it was negotiated. And through automation, with the 12 hour shifts, they actually (I shouldn't say this) did themselves a favour, because they managed to eliminate jobs, by instituting the 12 hour shifts.

TE: The 3 hour shift has always been a thorn in everybody's side. I've worked it myself. Your social life and family life, it didn't work. But the 12 hours we could handle. It was hard to teach the old boys the change to it.

Q: Did your wife work there?

TE: No.

SC: My wife did. She was in the export department.

Q: How did you work out your shifts?

SC: I worked in a unit of just under 100 people. Over the years there was a few marriages within the shift. Some progressed very well. The biggest thing we found out was as soon as the plant went down and everybody was out of work, 3 out of the 5 marriages broke up. In my case, I married my best friend's ex-wife, and we're still good friends. We both have families and everybody's close, the kids and stuff, so that worked out well. Socially, I just said to my wife, I'm on a 12 hour shift, this is my schedule, let's work around it. She worked straight days. So raising a family, when you were all night shift it was hard to get to the kids' ballgames and stuff. Sacrifices were made, but otherwise if you could trade off a shift. But no one every wants to take your weekend nights, that's just the hard facts of life. But we worked around it.

Q: ?

TE: Like I said, I started in 1981. Just after that there were 19 new people brought into the unit...Let's say 15 out of the 19 were there still with me. It was quite a close knit unit

that I worked in. Our social life, we started a baseball slow pitch team, which ran for 20 years. We basically had the philosophy that spending half my life, if you take 12 hour shifts, spending half with them and half with you. You grew as a family. We had our problems, we had our tiffs, we had all kinds of problems. But we became a family, our unit.

SC: And ours too, it was a family. You worked with the same people, the same shift. They had the same problems, you saw people raise families, marital status change. When you work with the same person for 16 years, you know them better than you know yourself in certain cases. When 4 o'clock in the morning comes along, conversations get deep and intimate. It just happens. No disrespect to our spouses, but sometimes you confide in a fellow more than what you'll confide to your own wife. Just a fellow worker that fate put you together with, but then you begin to like this guy. When his unit went down, because of seniority, they got to bounce people out of our unit. Fortunately, the way things were working, they did attrition and actually absorbed most of the jobs, so it wasn't too bad. But all the senior people came in, and Tom in his case, because we knew him socially from other aspects of the plant, he was welcomed with open arms. But there were other people came in there with a chip on their shoulder. We got phone calls at 3 o'clock in the morning from these guys saying, ah what's your locker number, I want to come and look at it. You just like, okay this is it, but it doesn't matter, cuz I'm not going anywhere anyway. But some guys were pretty bitter about it. But after 25 years you can understand it, they've got to take their frustrations out. It's family, that's a big word. It is family.

Q: Were employees involved in the community?

TE: Some, but I wouldn't say a lot, because of the 12 hour shifts. We stayed within our own little community, we called it. Back in the early years I was sitting there doing 12 hour shifts. At one point I said, 50% of us are going to be divorced because of this shift. It is not great for family. I think that number was higher. Over the next 25 years, I'd say 62% of the people on the plant site, not just our unit, had divorces. Bitter ones too, because of the 12 hour shift. It took a toll on your family life. I'm one. Three and a half years after starting shift, my ex-wife is one of my best friends right now. Now it's all cleared up, done. It took a toll

SC: My wife had to deal with me being a long distance truck driver, so all of a sudden I was home more. It actually was an adjustment for us to get used to me being there, especially when I started out on straight days. My biggest reaction the first week was when 3 o'clock or 3:30 rolled around and the guys said, we're done for the day, you can go have a shower and get ready. I looked at them like, duh, what's going on here, the day's just starting, there's at least 8 more hours to go. But it was the adjustment phase, and it made our marriage better. Then when I did go on shift, there was another adjustment. But it wasn't as stressful as...

TE: The turnover from shift to straight days is, like my wife, ... he's a lump on the couch. She was so used to having her down time, if you can call it that, when I was working nights. She'd be here and it would be her space. Now all of a sudden, who's this old guy sitting on the couch, this lump?

Q: ?

TE: We actually had a committee where the union and the company got together and formed a committee, where any changes in the machinery or anything was discussed. That was the union and management, would sit and meet monthly.

SC: Everybody participated in the committee at one point. We all did. Everybody had a shot to be on that committee, to have a voice. We also elected members into it. They finally found out that that was the best way, to appoint somebody and ????. But everybody was encouraged to put in their 2 cents in ideas. ... They had all kinds of different programs, task apprentice program, it was very good. I would say right now being an outsider from there going out to what I call the real world... I actually retired when Celanese shut down. I did retire and I didn't last 5 months.

Good safety awareness in a unionized plant site with good management focus on safety is probably the ? requirement out there right now. I would say you are at 50% more risk of getting hurt in a non-union environment than you are in a union environment. Everybody makes safety their issue. That seems facetious, but it's not. When you're out there and your boss is just getting things done and he doesn't have that accountability to you, you really can't become where you're your own master and away you go, you just do whatever. Whereas under the union environment, there's always somebody to answer to immediately. I just think that the follow up on incidents, everybody seems to be touting words like incidents and near misses. But follow up and actual change is not happening out there, not like it did on the plant site, not with the union and management actually buying in on a program.

TE: I don't want to tout the union too much, but it was the union that went to management and said, we will work with you, but you also have to give a little bit here and there. It's a give and take. We fought for quite a while. It took quite a while for the management, not just on the plant, but the head office through Dallas. You're going into an environment down there that's totally different than the Canadian environment. The mentality down there was, now you're just going to do what we tell you to do. For the staff up here and the unions to come together and show Dallas that we can work together for change, and it worked.

TE: You go out to any other site right now, some of these??. No safety, nothing. It's just do the work, get it done, get it done. That's where we're losing people to injuries and deaths. All of a sudden a kid falls off a building 4 stories up because they don't have the proper railing. Where was the construction safety ?? Celanese and the union made sure, zero injuries, zero loss. They put in the ?, the company came to us, and the union started this tap process. You're continuously working this machine and you go on and on, you don't realize the problems that can happen which could harm you. It took quite a while for people to get over, because it looked like a tattle tale program. But eventually people saw it for what it was. That was initiated by the union. The company said, here, you do it. Two of us went into that, and I was one of them. It took them a while, the people on the site, union members, to agree to it. They said, it's company program. But we're running it, we're initiating everything. They gave us free rein. It's still looked at by companies in the States.?...

SC: I ran on my shift as a staff representative. I went to people and asked them, look at this... They said, well I'll go do something and you'll tell me I'm doing something wrong. It's not that we're going to write it up so I get in trouble, just write it up as a record of wrong behaviour, which anybody can develop a bad habit. So I have to give credit to the fellow I'm working with, he has 2 of us with all our safety and training and stuff working for him. He has come and asked us how did we do it there, what did we look for, how did we arrange these programs to correct peoples' behaviors? First of all, I said, it's a no blame game. You've got to correct people by teaching them the right way to do things, and not to do shortcuts. As long as you're in these environments where people are always product, production, production, and not look at anything. I said, you have hazard assessments. You have a job, let's do hazard assessments. He says, I like that term. I said, so the other day I did something, I says, I gotta do a hazard assessment on this. By the time I was finished I needed gloves, work boots (we don't usually wear steel toes in my job), steel toes, goggles, and the full protective gear, hearing protection and everything, and I wound up stepping on 4 nails, and never got an injury out of it. I wore the right equipment. As I can spread this on through Frank and another couple of people, we can make the place better. Isn't that what it's all about? In the case of Celanese, I would say that the management had the right people buy into it. That's what it comes down to is the people. If you've got people communicating to the union and management, you get things done. That was something rare about Celanese. They were doing it 10 or 12 years ago before it was becoming the big thing in industry. There was a couple of directives, there were some forward thinking people way up in the organization that actually realized that if we can reduce our injuries, things go down for us, and we're going to actually save and make money and save people, why not? So they sat down and put it on the shoulders of the main guy who ran the unit and said, get your people in on this, start discussions; otherwise, you're the one that's going to ?, not them.

Q:?...

TE: I would say that actually enhanced it somewhat. The philosophy out there was safety is number one, production is number two. But when you're out on the floor and working, you know production is number one.

SC: If you don't have an incident, you don't shut down production, you don't have to investigate, you don't spend money treating that person, and you don't lose that production. So you gain. Every time somebody gets hurt, they stop. Investigations have to be held, things have to be slowed down. Now you've got more ? covering that person missing. So by keeping us working safe, they actually saved money. Production stayed, and you had happier people too. That was another thing. Because of the tap program, you identified bad pieces of equipment. They actually went out of their way to fix it. People used to ? their way around it, just wire and duct tape. Towards the end when they didn't want to spend any fixing things, it kind of lapsed back into that. But they did spend a lot of money repairing things that ran for 2 weeks afterwards. It was safer. I was never a big union touter, but when the safety issue came out of it, I changed my whole aspect of it. It was the way to go.

...

TE: That would be the petrochemical side... PE, that side of the track. On one side you had cellulose acetate and cigarette filters. On the other side was the chemical side. That was a flaw on the company's side. People in there wanted to change it. PE, the price went down.

SC: Let's just say the way it was, as a Canadian plant we were never wanted to be here. I started in 1998? and I got told, why are you taking a job here, we're going to close it down next week. They were always trying to figure out some way to shut us down. They'd raise the bar a little higher; we'd succeed, we'd go over it. They'd cut costs, raise product. It took them 20 years, but they finally did it. They finally managed to shut it down. It was a moneymaker. Right now if Celanese was running right now, just for methanol, with the world market demand, they say Celanese would have made \$400 million this year alone... The US did not want this Canadian plant running anymore. It's just something about the fact that we're up here, we're landlocked. They figure they can be cheaper. I know for a fact they used to spend over \$100 million shipping products out, a year. Down in the States where closer regional, and of course globalization. All our production went to Mexico and China. They went as joint ventures, ...plus they see the writing on the wall. The main product, acetate, would not be in demand here after a while, because smoking is being slowly phased out.

Q: ?

TE: I wasn't really concerned when they did this, personally. But it affected people like you wouldn't believe. From depression so far we've had 2 or 3 deaths. Not related to it, but just physically, depression. A lot of people have gone through depression. The divorce rate, it took an impact on a lot of people hard.

: I would say socially it really hurt Edmonton, by those people who lost their jobs. We made really good money for the amount of education a lot of us had. Myself in the last 5 years, I did 6 figures every year, plus. I have a high school education and whatever the ? has taught me. They taught me well so I think I gave them good value, but I gave them my time too. I did over 300 hours overtime per year.

SC: The community got hurt by it too also. Now you've lost that income, you've got hundreds of people that has lost a high income. The community out there, charities. One thing that we were really proud of as members there is our participation in charities. United Way, we would raise hundreds of thousands of dollars, just the plant. Even when we were closing, people still contributed. They lost out. The city lost out in natural gas. We were one of the highest buyers of natural gas, with the methanol unit.

TE: The guys aren't running out there and buying like they used to be. You've got a guy making that kind of money, he goes and puts those dollars right back into the community. Other aspects...community organizations, coaching kids and stuff. You had the ability to go out there and give your time. You didn't have to have a second job or whatever. We could afford to spend the money on gas on the weekend to haul a bunch of kids out to Beaver Creek to baseball tournaments. You could afford to do that, stay out of town and stuff, because of your income. So there is the impact, definitely.

... In my 25 years there I ... then Hoechst Germany purchased it and it became Hoechst Celanese, which gave Dallas more power over the Canadian entity. Then right at the end

they went back, Dallas basically bought it and took it back to the Celanese name. Then Blackstone came, killjoy as they called him, because they come in and do this kind of thing all the time. They took their name off and called it Celanese America. Each time someone took us over our plant came into money. In our unit, the cig tow unit, a cig tow bale is maybe 600 kg each bale. The profit that this company made per bale was \$2500 American above cost. One hundred bales per shift for 12 hours. I don't know if you remember years ago, that big plastic fiasco, the piping down in the States that all deteriorated. Well guess what, Celanese America was involved in that. All of a sudden, boom, we get sold and they got sued. But they pulled out \$300 million out of us, Celanese Canada, to pay for that. So the company came in and said, hey we can buy this company and make money. So now we're in debt for 10 years... When methanol started they said it was going to take 10 years, back in '81 or '82 when they started it up, they said it was going to take 10 years to pay it off. It took 4 years. We were a cash cow.

SC: Cash cow was the exact word, because when Hoechst bought Celanese they took over \$1 billion out of that little plant site, in cash. Then they sold it and they saddled it with \$400 million debt. This is a cash cow, and they got another \$400 million, and walked away from it. It's kind of like Peter robbing Paul; it all comes down to taxes. They're playing with their books. So then Celanese Canada made enough money to pay that \$400 million off. Another reason not to close it down was because they jumped the thing. It seemed like every time the next incarnation came in, well Blackstone finally got rid of us because we couldn't make 25% profit, that's why they shut it down. We were making 7% profit. Our profit sharing, even in the last few months, was fantastic.

TE: The unit that I worked in, the cig tow, there's one down in South Carolina. Down there it's a small little community place, and they were having layoffs. Your next-door neighbor gets laid off and you're right beside him. Down in the States it's a totally different environment. They'd have 5 people down there doing the job, they'd have 5 individuals doing what I do up here by myself. But the profits weren't that great. They had to take those cig tow bales through the Panama Canal to get them to China. Whereas we just trucked them straight to Vancouver, on the boat, and over to China. ... Being landlocked wasn't that big of a deal.

SC: When they decided to shut this plant down, they actually shut one of the plants down in the States as well. ... I think what it is is they were cutting production to dictate price. Right now they can cut their own production. They actually bought another plant when they were closing down, they bought a plant in Europe to produce for their European customers. They took our production out and bought another one so they could control the market. I think what it is is more market control than anything, which leads down to globalization, because we're masters of our own destruction here. Anybody who's got a mutual fund plays the stock market and has their investment and retirement accounts all tied up in this. Everybody wants more money. What do companies do to get more money? Cut costs. Back when my grandfather had all his GICs in a bank drawing 10%, he was laughing. He would've never put 2 cents into the stock market or mutual fund, because he was making great money and he had money to retire on. We're all looking to that almighty dollar. We've got this think in our head that we're supposed to have a million dollars in the bank by the time we're 65 to have a comfortable retirement. It's sad

to say, but we're the masters of our own destruction in a way. Greed is all it comes down to; it's all greed.

... I would say it's because we don't have anything that's really Canadian owned here... It's owned by the Dutch or Chinese or Koreans or whatever, and they say, well this is what we want to do. Because the royalty issues, look at what happened a couple of months ago when they were going to have to shut down their exploration and everything because the provincial government was going to nail another 20% in royalties on them. It was like the end of the world. Well guess what? The world didn't end, the plants are still going. I think that any country should protect its natural resources and should not allow them to just do whatever they want. That is ours. I don't care where you're from, you put up a big production plant on top of our resources, it's still our land, it still comes from us. I own farmland and I'm not allowed to own the mineral rights to it. So I don't think that Dutch Shell or anybody else should be allowed to own mineral rights here either. They should be able to buy it from us, develop it, create jobs, and better our economy, and not take it to another plant somewhere. That's another thing. Why is it that these massive refineries are on the coast where the hurricanes?? Why aren't they landlocked here where we can pipe the stuff down to them? Let's just reroute it to another pumping station and fill up their tanks, instead of having it shipped down there and processed and then sold back to us. That doesn't make any sense at all.

TE: I'd be surprised if it was 10%.

SC: Our natural gas is shipped on a 30 year contract with Chicago. It was supposed to even out the market. Geez, my gas bill is triple what it used to be.

TE: I don't know how many people have said they just want to find that shutoff valve for that pipeline. But look at it now, they didn't have a hurricane season, they didn't have a cold snap like they expected, so their reserves are all filled up. They don't need that; natural gas prices are going down. But is your utility bill going down?

SC: Another thing I noticed traveling through the States, my wife and I were traveling through the States, gas is sold in the New York Stock Exchange, and that's how they change their gas prices up and down every day. We bought all the expensive oil when it was really high, but we never buy any of that cheap stuff, so you're going to keep paying \$4 a gallon in Canada for your gasoline. I don't think it's fair but they get away with. Why? Because we're too bloody complacent.

TE: You're talking about provincial government, but it's also the Canadian government, which is overshadowed by the US government. What does the US want? They want oil, gold, everything they want they're going to get. They bypass our government... They don't invade us but they invade Iraq. I don't care what they say, they're in there for the oil, they want it, and they're going to do it. Look at Canadians. Oh you want to raid us? C'mon in. If I step on your toes I'm sorry.

SC: You're going to pay me how much? I'm retired; I don't care, I'll be dead before it affects anything...

... I own farmland, and I have no say when it comes right down to it. My farmland happens to lie right in the middle of a corridor of where all these pipelines are going to run through for extra product, exporting. I have no say over it. I can't say no, I don't want your pipeline on my land. They just say, this is what we're going to give you. I don't even get to see, well geez you tell me everything's worth this much, but you're only going to give me about \$400 an acre for this, and I can't do anything with it. I can grow grass, big deal. I have no say over anything. But those big guys have all that money and they're going to keep it.

...I would say that Ralph Klein and Ed Stelmach are the only last 2 premiers that weren't big oilmen. You have Lougheed, Getty, and all the other guys, always involved with big oil in one form or another. Ed Stelmach comes from the same place I do... he lived 5 miles away from my ? farm. As a farmer he realizes that, but we don't know what's going on in the back rooms; that's the unfortunate part. Do we have any power over these big corporations? Do we? Can a union even stop them? They're all unionized, they're not building non-union or anything. ... We're fighting for some reason with our own resources. I don't know if we actually have power as people to tell these guys, no, go to hell; you don't like it, we'll get somebody else to develop it. We should maybe be putting in more of our 2 cents. I think it's ours and it's our grandchildren's. I'm a big touter of the Heritage Trust Fund, for what it's meant to be. Many years ago they used it as a slush fund and finally paid the debt off and it has some real value to it again. I think it should grow, because one day if they keep doing this, the bitumen will be gone. There is no more to go back to. Our kids or our kids' kids will be saddled with high taxes trying to make a living. You can plant more trees, but that's not working out that great around here either. We have to come up with a plan to make things work. You listen to everybody out there about natural resources, everybody's trying to go geothermal or whatever. There's conversion for your furnace for an electric hot water tank, and it's actually cheaper than running gas. You've got gas to your house anyway because the gas company charges you because you have a meter hooked up to your house, so you're charged all this nonsense, delivery charges, because the access is there.

Q: We have sun and wind and ...??

SC: That's what we've always said, they're selling out everything. We can't all be in the service industry. You have to make something here to be viable. Services only go so far and that's it. Eventually it's all going to collapse when we don't have something to build a foundation on. You have to have manufacturing; you have to take your raw resources and make something with it, right here.

... It's costing us money.

TE: It's great for some people, just like back in the '70s. Everyone in that industry is... The people who aren't involved in it, retail, food industry, there's not enough people. The wages, it's gone back to the boom of the early '70s. The early '70s did nothing for it here, and this is doing nothing.

SC: The other day I'm driving by a sign at McDonalds is hiring people at \$10 an hour, and I'm getting twice that for a skill set of carpentry and masonry work. But I can just go sling burgers for \$10 an hour instead of working at a skilled job. And I'm lucky -- I have no mortgage and I have no debt.

... That's why I said it's a minority. If you're a skilled tradesman in pipe fitting, electrical, steel, construction, you're okay, you're making great money.

Q: What'll happen after the construction boom?

SC: Then you'll see all those guys, they're going to go home. A lot of them don't live here anyway. They're flying them up into these projects on weekly plane rides. I forget what the percentage is, but there's a lot of guys living back in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and they're flying up here, working up here, and flying home for the weekend. There's no benefit to us anyway – the money's gone out of the province right now even on that level. Homelessness up in Ft. McMurray is quite severe for the guys who got into the drugs and everything, so there's that. Now you've got your social impact; somebody's gotta pick up the tab to try and help these people out, whether they brought it on themselves or whatever. Services up there are strained. Look at the cost of a house in Ft. McMurray; same house that you can buy here for \$250,000 is \$500,000 up there.

TE: The communication world now with computers and everything, that Facebook. I got on it and next thing you know you're seeing people from Celanese. Now there's 35 members on there and it's growing. It's more of a keep in touch with everybody. It was a huge...we were all together.

SC: The 2nd Tuesday of every month we meet at a bar and ? to see how everybody's doing. It's growing, it started off with 4 or 5 people and now the last one, 10 were there. People you wouldn't expect to show up, they're feeling a little out of the loop for family wise. When you get in there you just see big smiles come on people's faces when they walk in, oh you're here, great. It's almost like meeting your cousin for the first time in a month or two. We spent half our life with these people. It's nice, now we're starting up the donair club. Famous Donairs in Sherwood Park, he's awesome. Robby makes the best donair I've ever tasted. He's invited us on a Saturday. Every so often, if we want, he'll close out his regular customers and give the whole place to us. We all have a supper there. The first one we had was about a month ago, and 10 people showed up, which was nice. Robby turned away probably that many plus customers, that were regular. He just said, sorry I'm closed, these guys booked it privately.

TE: Fellow employees were like family. A lot of guys didn't want to admit that it was family, but they rely on each other outside of work. Like I say, divorces and everything, I could phone you and have a voice. You would never talk to your wife about these problems. We worked together for so long, it was easier for me and you to talk. We could discuss our problems and ...

SC: Celanese was a special group of people. My youngest son worked with Tom for a while as a summer student, and he stayed on. That's how much he liked working in that unit. Instead of going back to school he decided to stay on. He enjoyed it so much that only a year and a half into Celanese and then they closed his area down and he got laid off, he still misses it. He looks back to that with fond memories. It says a lot to the people that were working there, about how they cared about each other and brought the newcomers in. I think when Tom came to our unit he can attest to how we took them in

without grumbling or saying, well you're taking jobs away. It was special. It was just a matter of survival when it comes down to it.

... First off, they gave us 3 years notice. How many companies will tell you 3 years from now that you will not have a job here? Then they came out with the negotiations through the union about how they were going to allow a sum of money for education to help get yourself set up for another job. It was broad open to anything you wanted for training. You got \$3000 per person, that's what they started off with, or \$2500. A lot of people went for their steam tickets. Older fellow like myself, we took different types of trade stuff, so we didn't have to worry about it. I know one guy who took golf classes to become a golf pro. The company didn't care. It's something that if you were forwarding yourself to advance so you could leave Celanese and go to work the next day, their package was awesome. It was all negotiated through the union.

TE: Through the agreement. But it was basically like a negotiation. Lloyd Harder was chief steward at that time. He was just fairly new in the job, about a year and a half. All of a sudden, whomp, layoffs, worst thing anybody wanted to hear in that position. They never took it because... They negotiated everything. They gave us the education... had to produce a paper saying you were taking the course. You had to complete the course before you go the money. A lot of them didn't have education when they started there, so they had trouble with their math, whatever. Then they failed, so they were out \$1800. Through negotiations with the union, the company turned around and said, okay, show us that you paid for the course, and we'll give you the money. They saw that problem. But even severance packages, everything was negotiated, and we were going through negotiations for a contract.

SC: And the next thing about the educational fund, if you took a \$1500 course you weren't cut off, you got to spend the rest of the money on another aspect of education. If you wanted to, you could use your entire sum up. There wasn't only one kick at the kitty, and that was a good thing.

TE: You were asking about the severance packages that they offered us. There was a little flaw that I found out about it. They got our pension, you could move it to wherever. Then we got 2 weeks pay plus 15%, 2 weeks for every year served plus a partial year. You could move your pension up; it was up to you. You could ? retirement if you had enough severance package to pay yourself all the way through to your retirement date, so a few people took advantage of that. Personally, I decided I'd look after myself, so I pulled. I've been fine myself.

TE: A lot of people aren't. People with the same amount of years as you, say 18. Let's say they walked away with \$40,000 cash. Well within 6 months after that there was no more cash. So 21/2 years later they're shutting down the plant. I went from no mortgage to a mortgage to out of work. But that's hearsay, because this place didn't really cost me that much. ... A lot of people, when I left my unit, a lot of people didn't have the education. They went in there with below grade 12, some of them started at grade 10 and 11. They left with a knowledge of what they were doing at work, but their education level to go out and find a job and be accepted by an employer wasn't there. I know a lot of people that went into industries, work at the casinos, working in grocery stores. That's what they could find, that's the only education they had. So when they left they had a

little bit of severance package, which was chewed up. They helped themselves up by paying off mortgages and stuff like this. But a lot of them didn't, because it wasn't that big of a package. In 18 years you get so many week's pay, but when you're out of work and you don't have the education and you're looking for work and you're not finding that work that you're used to money-wise or what you were into with a 4th class steam ticket. But you didn't need it to run a boiler at Celanese. A lot of people went down hard, spent that money.

SC: That's another thing: when they were preparing people for the layoff, they had budgeting courses where they tried to make you put down what you had for liabilities and assets. You realized, this is what's going to be happening when my paycheque stops. God bless my wife, because she's a genius with money, and we're in a good situation because of her working the numbers. But if you didn't have somebody looking after you that way, you were ???. Before you knew it you went from \$30 to \$12 an hour, and the harsh reality is you're still spending as if you were clearing that big money, and your severance package has disappeared. On the other hand, there's other people who went back out into the industry, they had jobs the next day. ? bought himself a brand new BMW. He always wanted a car like that, and he has it now.

Q: What does the future hold?

TE: I'm not very optimistic about the future. We're not doing a good job; we're doing the wrong thing. We need to build industry, we need to make jobs that create a product that'll be shipped... I have sons that are in their 20s.

SC: Unless you get to refineries. You're still okay there for a couple more. But as long as we have a bitumen supply it's gonna be tough.

TE: They say you're going to go through 15 careers in your life. ... Even my dad, he says in his generation he worked in various industries...

TE: I think because our management progressed through the ranks, they saw where ? create a lot of issues, especially in the safety end of it. So what they did was they trained you as you went to another job, and they rotated you through so you didn't forget the first job. I became a senior operator. A senior operator had to know 9 different jobs and be proficient in 6 of them. You still had to know the entry level job because you had to trouble shoot. They always kept you going through everything. It got to the point that they came up with recertification tests and I had to recertify every 3 years on all those other jobs. So there I was, scratching my head, doing paperwork on a job I hadn't done in 3 years, and go to the guy that's doing the job and say, when you're making that, is it 50 kg of acid? Everybody helped everybody else out, because they understood that you knew the equipment, you knew that the medial bits of information you could always find out. As long as you could perform the 6 jobs that you were proficient on. They rotated us through and kept us sharp. You didn't get bored by staying on the ? 10 days in a row. The unit I came from and various other units on the plant site, you'd be involved... asking about progression, Petro-Canada's progression... read a manual and do the job, and move up. They tried to implant that at Celanese and they said no, we don't want progression. I was in a unit of 100 people where Sam worked in a unit of 40. The opportunity was there

for progression, for the lowest person in 4 years to be paid the highest scale. They didn't want 100 people getting the highest scale. They dropped out, they did not want to bargain progression, they forced it in our unit on people. If you didn't progress they kept you back. There was guys there 12, 15 years same thing, on the wheel, that's all they did 12 yours. Progression should've been in there but the company said, no. This came from Dallas. We'd say to them, then why don't we go to Dallas and sit with these guys. We always have to say, we'll get back to you, and phone to Dallas. It was like going through mediation.

SC: Whereas in my unit it all came down to who your superintendent was. We had a superintendent at the time who wasn't very forward-looking. His replacement that came in up the ranks, his dream was he'd like to have all senior operators on every shift. That was his goal, he didn't care if he lived 25 years or 7 years, but it would at least take you 7 years to become a senior operator. His goal was if everybody was up on that level he knew he'd have a better functioning unit. He didn't care about the pay scales; he said, I don't care, it doesn't matter. He said, you guys more than make up that difference of money in production and better quality with less breakdowns. They could save money by having better skilled people. He encouraged, because when the severance packages came around you were paid by whatever your last posting. So if you could get yourself to senior. That was a big chunk of change difference in what you got in your severance package.

...
SC: I think what you're saying is that knowledge base that we developed that could've been transferred over to other aspects was lost, because I chose to never work shift work again. There's only one situation where I'd ever go back on shift work, and that's if Celanese phoned me and told me they were starting up again. That was a very enjoyable job. I could've retired very happily there, and not just the money, it was because of the environment. It would've been another 7 or 8 years...

SC: I'm gonna go out on a limb now. Where I work now, one of our ?, ... There's a stigma because they're unionized, they got power, and they don't like that. They're in fear of what's going on. Because it's unionized, they can't just say, this is what's going on. They now have to negotiate. It's like they've lost a bit of the power they used to have; now they have to negotiate with these people. ?? sit down, have a meeting, talk about it, make it work for everybody. As long as you come out with a better product or service, as long as our residents are safer and better looked after, I think it's win-win. But that's not what I'm seeing. It's power-sharing, and a lot of places, management doesn't want to share. Union usually means a better standard of living. But again, if you sit there and do it in increments and be fair to both sides, there is money to go around for everybody.

TE: Keep it here, develop here, invest here. Make something for our kids, make something for our grandchildren. Let's build a community that can be self-sustaining and be proud, and not kowtowing to the...
It's across Canada, and it's really sad the way we're going. It's such a huge nation, 35 million.

SC: Let's be leaders here in Alberta. Let's start it here in Alberta. Build here, stop it. This is where the big draw is, like a big drain. Apparently Saskatchewan has bigger bitumen

deposits than we have here, but it's so remote that it's tough. I'd heard rumors of 150 mile conveyors being set up to take the bitumen from Saskatchewan to Alberta to develop... I think there's a lot more truth to that than people might think. Mechanization, it's just a conveyor going across swampland, another pipeline.

TE: I tend to stay away from politics cuz I'm disgruntled. You don't discuss politics, religion and other things at a party... I know they've heard me, Sam and myself, doing the closing parties we've had for the shifts in the unit. We've made slide-show presentation and stuff... keeping in contact with everybody. I think it was a family and I think everybody understands that it was a family and we've got to stay a family. Over the years you're going to need someone to fall back on for support... I loved everybody. I was the poster boy for harassment... I got away with it with humour. If I went to another jobsite right now, the humour that I have and went through what I did, I'd be ...

SC: Where I work now, I work with one of the other fellows I used to work with at Celanese. We instituted the group hug. The looks on those people when you grab somebody into a makeshift group hug was, what are you guys doing? This is how it was such a family; it wasn't an embarrassing moment. Group hug, 3 o'clock in the morning, group hug. Seven people got up from their chairs and, all right, okay, we're doing good here.

TE: I used to call it a titty press with the ladies, cuz I used to work with a lot of ladies. I was straight up with them, c'mon I'll give you a titty press. Some of them would. But if someone else would try it, they would just give them a disdained look. I said, I've got to stop doing this, because people are trying it and then they're getting in trouble over it. Like you say, 3 o'clock in the morning I was sitting there and all of a sudden I'd get, Okay group hug, c'mon. Everybody would get up and group hug. Guys would walk by and see us hugging. There was so much homophobic out there. You guys are gay. I said, ya, is there a problem?

SC: We just corrected them. We're not gay, it's called bisexual, c'mon, don't be scared. A hug is a hug, that's all it was. We did everything with humour too. The saddest events, you can always find a zinger in there to lighten up the situation.

TE: We're finding that out in the jobs we're doing right now. The humour in the jobs we had during the 12 hour shifts, it's not there. That's why they're ? with the jobs they're doing now, because it's not there.

SC: The empathy is missing.

TE: What are they going to do? They're going to fire you. So what, you'll find another job, maybe flipping burgers or working with nuclear reactors. There'll be a job; just have some fun. Enjoy.

SC: That's one thing we learned at Celanese – work can be fun. You're there to perform a duty and a service, but you can have fun doing it. It's no disrespect to the company if you have happy employees. That was one of the things with our last superintendent. Hhe realized that we may be a bunch of clowns at times, but we were skilled clowns who

knew what we were doing, and he could rely on us. We weren't paid to do a job every 5 minutes or to perform some duty. We were there for when the chips came down, take that training they'd given us, and put everything back right to prevent an explosion or prevent an incident where somebody got hurt or an environmental release. That's what we were paid and trained to do. If we were sitting there reading a book or playing on the computer, it wasn't because we had nothing more to do. We had our tours, we did our work. We were conscientious about it. But we were there also to prevent or mitigate circumstances that could lead to an injury or environmental release. That's what the primary goal was, was not to have those. Things do break, things change. If you can minimize it, the company makes more money and you can prevent injuries and environmental releases, which again they save more money. That's what it came down to. Develop a high skilled workforce and use them properly, and don't be scared of a union because they've got some representation. Work with it. Take some lessons from some of our managers. If you can get hold of Barry Thompson and talk to him, he's probably one of the best people I've ever worked for. He was awesome. When he said he had an open door, it was open. He listened to you.

TE: He was one of the rare ? that you'll find on any jobsite where he had an open door. The majority of them out there...

SC: He's one that we had respect for, and he started ???, he called the shots.

TE: From the bottom up, he came in and worked his way up.

SC: You've gotta respect a man that does that. Anyone that can do that, and not let it go to their head. He was just... he was a fellow coworkers, he just had the big shoulders to rest all the blame on. You can admire someone like that. He's part of our group that we still stay in touch with.

TE: People ask, what did you do at Celanese for 25 years? I carried a clipboard. They go, you had to have done something. I say no, I worked with people but I carried a clipboard. If you were to come up and ask me to do something, I'd just look at all these people and say look, if you want me to get this done, you're going to have to wait. I've played hide and seek for 25 years... I could go around and joke about this. It changed the atmosphere in that place from the old boys way back till now. When we left there was a lot of family there, there was good times. But I'd walk around, we don't like you ?? smiling. You can't walk around and be happy all the time. But I am. You're paying me over \$30 to carry a clipboard. This was annoying them and then they would leave other people alone. They'd come to get on them and they'd leave it alone. That was my job, carrying a clipboard.

SC: The union did give us, along with their budgeting thing, they taught us to write resumes. For those 3 years of training and all the courses you could take, which was great. But I basically didn't do anything because I wasn't worried about looking for work. When I had to write a resume I said, I should've taken that course. But I had the books, so I read through. I started listing down everything Celanese gave me an accreditation for, where I actually have a certificate saying, I am qualified to do high angle rescue, ? space training, fire suppression, rescue. All of a sudden I realize that this job I'm going to interview for, we don't need that much; I'm overqualified. This guy is going to look at me

and say, why would you want to work for us? Why don't you go and do this in the industry? I said, because I don't want to work shift work anymore, I want to work a dayshift. I realize that's the financial cost that it's going to be, and this is what I call the real world. I call it paid charity work.

TE: You asked about the resource center that was set up. That was brought on through Celanese Canada and the union. That helped a lot of people. Dawn that was running it, somebody would come in with his papers, she did up the resume. He'd come in with a few things done, like one piece of paper, saying, give me a resume. She'd say, I need the information from you, what've you learned? That resource center helped a lot of people. With Lloyd and the executive there it took a lot of time, because they always threatened to shut it down. We're not going to give you another 30 days. So everybody would rush in to do these construction courses, safety courses. They would rush, then all of a sudden the company would turn around and say, okay we're going to give you another 30 days but we need this. I gotta hand it to the executive at that point, and Lloyd, what they did near the end there I would not want to put myself through. What they had to go through at that end to deal with. It wasn't Celanese, it was the HR department of Hoechst, brought in near the end, knowing they only had 2 years and were brought in for that purpose. It was hard fought for the executive, and I applaud them big time.

SC: My situation how I got ???. I hurt myself about 2 weeks after I got my layoff notice. Apparently they've got this thing there, if you get a layoff notice they cut your benefits off and everything. I was off work, couldn't go get a job for 3 months after I got laid off. I still call it Mother Celanese. I'm grateful for everything that company has ever done for me in education wise and opportunity. The union fought tooth and nail trying to tell the company, he didn't go out there and deliberately hurt himself; he should be covered by his benefits for an extra 3 months. They said, well people have run their faces into pipe stems and everything to stay on benefits, so we can't do that, because we're scared he can't find a job. The human resource department, like Tom said, they had it very difficult. They were put in a very difficult position and they had to toe the line. I got cut off, but I'm not bitter about it. I got cut off but I went and got my severance. I waited and gave the union ample opportunity to fight it, and they finally just said, look we're not going to win. They're going to just keep drawing it out. If you want to get a lawyer, don't waste your money because you're not going to win. I said, well that's fine, don't worry about it. I still was in a very good financial position, so to me it wasn't vital. They just wanted to fight it out and I wanted to give the union a chance to do what they wanted to do. It sets a precedent, maybe not at Celanese, but the next company. Maybe we can change some attitudes or laws.

SC: They've got their rules; you couldn't take it personally. Well there was one guy you could've taken it personally with, but for the most part they had their hands tied. There was only one fellow there I can say enjoyed what he was doing. But you get that in anything. It all works, depending on the makeup of people.

TE: We got our notice in the unit that I was in, cig tow, Andy Day, our plant manager at the time, thrown into the position to say, okay you're all going to get laid off. I'd known him for 25 years. They came in and told us. It was about 2 days into the shift and aa friend and I went for a beer at the local pub. We go in there and we're told we're being

shut down, and 2 days later Blackstone announces they're buying the PA unit in Vancouver, which ? plastics. They're shutting us down, they're buying this new unit, but all they want is the VA from Vancouver but they don't want anything in Edmonton. So we were sitting there with the boys going, well you're going to be out of work soon too, cuz it's Blackstone.

[END]