

Celanese

Norm Proulx

Keywords

Celanese

cellulose acetate

cigarette tow

fibers

face masks/dust

community

fire crew

NP: My name is Norm Proulx. I started working at Celanese in 1986.

Q: Were you there right up until the plant closed?

NP: Yes I was. Not exactly, I was there until March 23rd, when the CA unit closed. Ethanol ran about another six months after that.

Q: What is the CA unit?

NP: CA stands for cellulose acetate. Basically cellulose acetate was a process where we took wood pulp and ground it into a batch system with acetic acid. It changed it from a triacetate to a diacetate. At a certain point we would add a catalyst to kill the process, and batch it through to two huge washers. The washers would wash the acid out, and make it into a flake for the fibers unit. The fibers unit would either use it, well 90% of it would go into cigarette filters. But before I started there, they would also make filament yarns and stuff for carpeting, the backing of carpeting, stuff like that.

Q: What are some of the other products they used to make?

NP: When I started in '86 they were already in cig tow, making filters for all the tobacco companies in Canada and China. They were even shipping to South America and Belgium.

Q: What was your job there?

NP: I started in the fibers unit. When you went into Celanese, most every person started in what they call preparation unit, in the fibers unit. There was about 80 presses; the presses took the CA flake and filtered all the impurities out. There was always some impurities in the system. They were huge presses, about 20 feet long. Every day we would have to pull out these biscuits that would form inside. They would take about a month to form and they weigh about 80 pounds. There were bigger presses and there were smaller presses. They were full of acetone and other stuff. We had to wear filtration masks. It was really hot in there; around the presses it was about 50 degrees C.

Q: The working conditions weren't that great then?

NP: Only that part; it would take you about an hour and a half to do that. Basically that first job was filtering the CA flake, recycling old filament yarn from cig tow that wasn't up to spec. We had three other batches, there was an R1 and R2 and R3 recovery systems. R1 and R2 were basically waste dope that would leak out of the presses. R3 was old fibers or cig tow that didn't make the spec, so we'd recycle it and reuse it, reprocess it.

Q: So you didn't let anything go to waste?

NP: No. Well there was some stuff, those really big biscuits I was telling you about, we put them in an oven and they would bake them for about an hour and get all the acetone, recover all the acetone. Then they get thrown out. Other jobs there I had to do, we had to make a dye, a white dye, for the machines. There were machine operators upstairs. The filament yarn would spin and pick up some of this dye to make the tow white.

Q: Was that a bleaching process?

NP: Ya, basically it was just a bleaching process. Then I stayed in preparation for about a year. Then they put me on shift. Once you start on shift, they would put you in a place called bale press. There were these big cans that would take two hours to fill. Once the cans are full, there's a person named a tow operator up on the upper floor that would cut the tow, because it was a continuous process. It was kind of a weird system, the way it was designed. We would pull those cans out and push a new one in, and then this tow process would start again. Then we would move these cans on a conveyor system over to a huge press which would go down about 30 feet, and we'd press these bales into 600 kilo bales, wrap them all up, tag them, and into the warehouse.

Q: It was exported in bulk?

NP: Ya, they were huge bales. They would take them, well we had lab techs that would test them. They would pull them off and they had to spin a certain way into filters or they wouldn't work right. I didn't really work in too many of the other processes there. I worked in ? for a while, and sometimes up in machines where you had to help them clean out dope heads. They were made of stainless, there was hundreds of them. When you'd take a machine down you had to take them out and clean them all out. But that's about all I did in fibers. I was only there for two years, and then went to CA.

Q: How did you come to be employed at Celanese?

NP: It's kind of weird. A buddy of mine was an electrician. At the time Celanese was doing some upgrades. He knew I was kind of looking for work. I was working for PCL Construction, I worked there for 11 years. But I was married with little kids at the time and out of town all the time;, my wife didn't like that. So he kind of started hearing that they were looking for operators, so he put a bug in my ear. I went to apply, put in a resume. They refused initially, they said they had no jobs at the time but they'd keep me on the books. Then about a month later I got a call to come in. I went in and wrote their OTQ, operator trainee qualifier. I must've did okay cuz about a week later they said,

come to work. I told them I had to give them two weeks notice. I was working in Swan Hills at the time.

Q: Was Celanese a good place to work?

NP: Yes, it was very convenient, it was close, 10 minutes away. Most of the safety aspects, they were pretty good about safety. Even now I hear people have gone on to other places, and the safety aspects weren't what Celanese were.

Q: Were you involved in the union?

NP: I was a member of the union, but I wasn't really involved in it. I'd go to some of the union functions.

Q: Were there a lot of fumes and dust in the plant?

NP: Ya, both in CA and, when I started in CA they tightened up things a lot. When I started there, some of the units, because it's such a dusty area, there'd be an inch of dust in some areas.

Q: So that got improved?

NP: Ya, that was part of the programs. It took about eight years after I come. I don't know if it was, cuz Celanese got bought out by Hoechst, and that's when things started to change. They came through there saying, that's not good, you guys need to start changing this stuff. I think that was in the '90s. They came along, took a look at all the areas and the units. Even our lighting was so poor, they went to sodium for lighting. They sealed a lot of the dusty areas, put in new gasketing and everything, and that made a huge improvement. They worked on the sound. I wasn't there when the older fellows were there, but some of the stuff they told me. I always wore earplugs. There was three kinds: the yellow ones, the green ones, and they gave you earmuffs. But even that changed with the dust system. When I started there, we were allowed to use paper masks. Then something happened, I remember reading something in New York, and all of a sudden 3M, that was the end of those. We had to wear the half masks or full face masks. They weren't doing their job. Even half masks for a while, they were banned from wearing them. But it got to the point where you couldn't see too good with a full face mask, because it was hot in the unit. So they decided to change it back to half mask. There were certain areas where you had to wear a full face mask. ... Going back to the jobs I had, when I started in CA, everyone started in shredders. We would all shred these rolls of pulp. Then we'd go to an area called section 6, which was all the batch systems. You made all the batches for the process on the CA side. Then you went to ripeners, which was basically the batch system and the process, but you would be doing sampling. Then from there you'd go into operation of things and be running the process. I stayed on the CA side for 10 or 12 years. Then there was movement in the AR side; CA and AR were the same. AR was the acid recovery end of things. So all that acid water from the washers I told you about would go to the settling tanks, and we would reprocess all that. It wouldn't have been economical to not do it, so we would reprocess all that acid back to CA and they would use it again.

Q: Was this all indoor work?

NP: CA was mostly all inside work.

Q: Were some jobs outside?

NP: Not too much, just to go outside to maybe take stuff to the garbage or bring in supplies. Or if our line would plug up, to fibers unit. Or during maintenance shutdowns you're going to have to go isolate lines on the roof. So that's when you're outside.

Q: Did you work shifts for most of the years you were there?

NP: Ya, I worked 12 hour shifts. We started on a rotating shift where we'd work 60 hours one week and 24 the next, 14 days a month. We did that for about 15 or 17 years, then somebody brought a new shift in and some of the units tried it. We tried it for a while. A lot of the older guys didn't like it. I kind of liked it, because it would give you more days off. The new shift was more like a fireman's shift, two days two nights.

Q: What role did seniority play?

NP: That was part of it, always seniority was part of it. The senior operators would train junior operators, plus the supervisors. Then there'd be ongoing training and safety all the time. We'd have safety meetings once a month to discuss what had happened, if there was any injuries, and what happened in other plants. Basically it was ongoing training internally.

Q: What do you think is the reason for the plant closing?

NP: I worked with a couple of the guys. When I even started there they were telling me back in the '80s that they had just about closed. I was a bit naïve at the time, but I guess if you don't have clients you don't have no sales. It was getting like that, where they were only running, it was running on a system of 8 to 32 rate or something. I don't know how to explain that. They were running so slow they were barely running. We could run that slow or we could run maximum rate. But all of a sudden they started getting clients again, they got some in South America and China and that, so things improved again. But from what I've read, most plants don't last more than 45 years. After 45 years they've had it, unless you bring in new units.

Q: What year was that, when it went down and then came back up again?

NP: That happened before I got there.

Q: At one time there was a whole community of people that lived near there.

NP: Ya, at its busiest there was 1200 employees. Then when I left there was maybe 150 left.

Q: That makes quite a difference in a community.

NP: Celanese was one of the biggest charity for the United Way' they would always give money. They would always come there every year, they would come to Celanese. For every dollar we put in as employees, Celanese would match it.

Q: Do you think the plant had a good effect while it was there?

NP: I never went to that many of their CAR, Community Awareness Response, emergency response. But they went into the schools and talked to children, and I thought they did a lot of good. I have two younger sons, and they tell me stories about people that have worked, lots of people have worked there. One works at Esso now and he hears stuff from older guys who worked at Celanese. Lots of people have rotated through there; they knew what that place was like.

Q: What do you think is in store for the future?

NP: I don't know if I should say this. Somebody was on the news when we were there a few years ago, and he was right on the ball. We were all thinking the same thing. I won't mention the name of the pipeline, but when that pipeline came in, that's when some of these companies went down and it happened just the way they said it was going to happen. I see a lot of it, even in this crescent. I see a lot of people in their 50s are getting bought out or severed off. I think some of the companies are starting to do that more and more. He worked for Gray Beverage, I don't know if I should say that either. Same thing, he's about my age, they decided they wanted to downsize. They packaged a bunch of guys off and they let him go.

Q: Do you mind me asking your age?

NP: I just turned 50.

Q: Are you working again now?

NP: Ya, but not in the same field. I debated about working shift. It was starting to bother me. That's why a lot of people, after they get in their early 50s, can't sleep as well anymore.

Q: How have you made out finding work?

NP: I'm not making what I used to make. But I'm not working shift work, and not in that type of hazardous environment anymore either. I'd like to be making better money. I don't know how to say this, but for me to start over at this at my age, I look at it and I have two sons that are engineers. I look at the knowledge these kids have now compared to if I was to start over. It would take me five years to catch up to them.

Q: How did you get involved with the volunteer fire department?

NP: When I started, there was no positions available on the fire department. There was four shifts: A, B, C, and D shifts. At the time there was a fire captain. It changed structure after, but at that time we didn't get as much training. We'd watch a lot of films about American heat; basically all the training was on the plant site. We never used to get to do much training like in Vermilion or anything. It started about three or four years after, possibly maybe when Hoechst came in, I don't know. Then they started sending a bunch of us to Vermilion to get our industrial firefighter certificate. Almost everybody that got on was trained at least to that level. It was good, because when I started I was a bit naïve, and then you realize as you're on there longer, you notice when the younger guys come it's not very safe for them to be just jumping into a fire situation with no training. It was good. When I went, they would send to Vermilion for a week to train. They would put you through the ropes, pushups and everything, and basic training. I basically progressed to crew leader on my shift. They were looking for a crew leader because the guy quit. They asked me and I went.

Q: Crew leader in the firefighting part of it?

NP: Ya. It's kind of weird, because all the crew leaders eventually came out of our unit. Some of the other units, like powerhouse and that, were on different shifts and they couldn't be there at certain times. We had a fair amount of operators. I believe there was nine on each shift. So that's why they chose our unit. It was good. There were only a few fires I can recall. There was one in our unit. Basically I was on shift that night; I was on C shift with some of the other operators. We had had problems with the packing on one of the pumps. It was a weekend, so we tried running through the weekend, but the other pump wasn't running so well either. So we stayed with that one and eventually the packing got so hot it caught on fire. It was an early morning shift. We got an alarm on the control panels, so we went and took a look. They sent me out to look, and sure enough I saw smoke, and the deluge had gone off already. We couldn't get in there to put it out. Even though the deluge is going off, it was still getting enough oxygen to burn. So right between shifts and everything, and there was guys coming from all over the place, so we had to divert them away from there. We came in with the fire trucks, and we had it out in about an hour or so.

Q: So they had fire trucks on the premises?

NP: Ya, there's a fire truck on the premises. The deluge system basically controlled it, but we had to go in and isolate valves so we could isolate the fuel source.

Q: Then would another fire crew come out afterwards?

NP: No, we didn't have enough fire crew for that.

Q: No, but would a municipal fire crew have to come out?

NP: Yes. We had what they called Strathcona Strategic Municipal Response. They would come out if you would call them. It was the same for us. We would go if they were to ask. It never really happened. We always wanted to train once together, but that never happened either. But it was good training, I really enjoyed it. We got to rappel off the

buildings. They finally started realizing that people going in the towers had to get training on rappelling and stuff.

Q: Did you get extra pay for being on the fire crew?

NP: No. They paid you for the hours of training and I believe they covered you better for insurance purposes, if something was to happen to you. But that's about it. Most of the guys on the crew enjoyed it, so that's why they stayed on it.

Q: How many fire crew were on any given shift?

NP: There had to be four or five of us on a nightshift. There was only so many of us around.

Q: Would you get called out for other shifts?

NP: There were call-outs, ya. ... And sometimes if they didn't have enough coverage for the fire crew, they would call guys out. ... I could talk about the other units. CA and AR units were one and the same, but different processes.

Q: What were the processes?

NP: Basically AR was all liquid. There was no batch system or nothing, just fluids going through the pipes. Stuff we dealt with there was acetic acid, benzene, methanol, ethyl ketone, and ethyl acetate, and acetic anhydride. Those were the four fluids that we dealt with.

Q: Did you wear protective gear?

NP: The operators would go, well when I started there, I believe it was three unit tours we had to do a night. Then they stopped that and went to two. That's when you were exposed more to whatever was in the units. I think that even changed a lot when I started. A lot of guys didn't wear masks when you walked through the units. But if there was a leak you'd smell it, because it was hot, the vessels were hot, and any drip on there would vaporize and you'd smell it right away. I guess 8 or 10 years, I don't know if it was that long, but things kept progressing. They started making us wear hat masks, and full face masks when we sample, plus neoprene gloves and everything. Then towards the end when all these new systems came out, like measuring solvents in the air, we had meters so we could go out on the units every night and check to see if anything was leaking. We'd report those so they could be repaired.

Q: Earlier employees must have had lots of exposure.

NP: There was a bit. It was like everything else though, they went with whatever was allowed. The government regulations would say, this is what you're allowed to do.

Q: Did any older employees get sick as a result of that?

NP: There was a few guys, but they didn't talk about it too much. A couple of guys have gotten cancer, but whether it was from there or not I don't know. Not that many. One operator I knew, he went on to work in the powerhouse. I don't know if I should talk about that stuff, but anyways he had cancer. ... They knew that benzene was a cancer-causing agent after; that's why they started wearing more protection. Even some of the units, like the CA unit, the walls of the silos were made of asbestos. Some of the ceilings and insulation all got reconverted; it was all asbestos for awhile. It was removed. I'd say that was in the early '90s. It was quite the process. They would wrap everything up and put it in bags, and it was all marked and everything. I don't know where they would take it. There was lots of it.

Q: Did they close for that?

NP: No, they would just build these big huge ?, and they would, I think it was positive pressure, they would blow air into it to keep it sealed or something. Then everything would get thrown into bags after. They would tape it off, saying that there was asbestos exposure there.

Q: Was that a factor in the closing of Celanese?

NP: That plus new processes coming online. There were certain systems, there were...I don't know if I should say that either. They were kind of pushing the limits of the engineering end of things. That's why some of the units were kind of closing off. Back in the '50s you were okay, but now if they were try to do that they would never allow it.

Q: They could've modernized the plant, couldn't they?

NP: Ya.

Q: That didn't seem to be part of the scheme, eh?

NP: Ya. We were hoping they were going to build a new acid recovery plant there. It was new technology, but they decided to build it in China.

Q: Do you remember what year they were building in China?

NP: It was about five or six years before it closed.

Q: Was that about the time Blackstone bought it?

NP: Ya. Even some of the companies, Hoechst wanted certain parts of the plant. They came along and bought certain parts of the plant and let go the rest of it. But even the methanol unit, we had heard stuff, and I always thought the methanol unit would run longer than that. But Methanex kept closing methanol plants around North America, and it was all going offshore.

Q: Did Celanese have other plants in Canada?

NP: There was one in Quebec, they did textiles. Drummonville, they basically had the same thing before us. They actually had something in Two Hills before I started, there was something in Two Hills. I believe it was called Chemsel when it first started. I don't remember any other plants. I think there was not much of a plant somewhere in eastern Canada, but it was just the management part.

Q: Over the years, since you started in '86, how would you sum up your work experience at Celanese?

NP: Personally, I enjoyed working with the employees that I worked with. They were all mostly good workers and most of the people got along. There was always the odd thing here and there, but it was a good place to work. They put on functions for children's Xmas parties and stuff like that. They had a thing called Triple C, where we would fund a bit and the company would put money in. They would put on these function, going skiing in Jasper, going to the horse races, football games. Children's Xmas parties-- the kids enjoyed that when they were younger.

Q: It was a plant that had an effect on peoples' lives.

NP: Ya, especially in the end, they were upset. It was kind of a weird place to work at the end. It wasn't only affecting us, it was affecting everybody, even management. There was no direction nowhere. Well that's what I thought personally. ... And they couldn't say nothing, because they knew. There was only one guy that got it head on though; he picked the date exactly. He said 2007, and he was right. ... When some of the other units kept closing, they kept telling us that they were going to keep the other units running and that it wasn't feasible to keep them running. I guess when we heard our unit got closed, then we knew the plant was all going down.

Q: Where do you think our government is going on this?

NP: I still do lots of reading, and I know in Germany they don't allow it. Here in Canada I don't know what's wrong with the governments. Why are they allowing these things to happen? Why are the rules designed so these companies can just move out? They can't do that in Germany; it would cost them too much money to move out, so they don't leave Germany.

Q: What does this mean for the future?

NP I really don't know. My generation will still be fine. But we're turning into an oil-producing province, I think. Part of that I don't agree with, we're just sending it. We need to upgrade stuff here to keep the jobs here. ... I know Alberta's trying to branch into other avenues, but I don't know how well it's working. We're still basically agricultural and oil or fuels. Petrochem is dying slowly, I think it is anyway. Next resource, water is slowly coming. They're already talking about it.

Q: That's the next thing we're going to see our government ship out.

NP: It's already happening, I hear it's already happening. ... If we start having to pay for water like we pay, look at our fuel costs. I don't agree with that part of it. I think if some of the governments would've kept the rules in Canada, like okay we can ship you guys fuel, but you're going to pay this, because our manufacturing stays here. But that never happened. Part of it was NAFTA saying that we had to pay whatever's on the market.

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

NP: All the guys I worked with were really good employees. Even management was on our side too. We only had one strike that I can remember there, and I think it lasted two days. That was before I started there. Union and management and employees seemed to work together pretty well in that plant. I've talked to guys that worked in BC, and they told me every two years they were prepared to be on strike.

Q: It sounds like higher up they weren't interested in keeping that industry going.

NP: Ya, I think some decisions could've been made differently. Definitely could be made differently.

[END]