

Celanese

Keywords: occupational health and safety, liquid formaldehyde, internal fire crew, cigarette tow, potentially dangerous environment, 8 hour shifts, 12 hour shifts, shift work, Ed Ewasiuk, union protection, certification, on the job training, social aspects, immigrant population, good place to work

Glen Walker

GW: My name is Glen Walker. I worked at Celanese during most of 1974, I would say 1974, '75, from spring to spring. I started out in the unit called the PE unit.

Q: What we want is today's date.

GW: Oh, it's November 6th, 2007. Well I started out in the PE unit, the pentaerithratol unit, which was maybe one of the worst jobs I've ever had. Pentaerithratol is a powder that's used in explosives and paint or something. It was bagged and shipped offsite, off the plant. My job was being at the end of a conveyor belt catching 50 lb. sacks of pentaerithratol that were hot. It would come hot out of the hopper and they'd fill the bag, put it immediately on a conveyor belt, and I'd put it into semi trailers and boxcars. It was summertime when I worked there, spring into summer, and it was an awful job. Fortunately I was able to bid out into an operators job in the formaldehyde unit, and that was a much more pleasant experience. I was a junior operator there, which meant you do the leg work for the 2 operators that would always be there. A senior operator worked the control panels and worked all the pneumatic stuff that would open valves and run the system. Then as a junior operator your job was to do the legwork for the senior operator. So the idea is that you would make periodic rounds and double check the readings, the accuracy of the control panel readings. In addition to temperature gauges on the control panel, there'd be a thermometer sitting in a pipe somewhere that you would check, and then those things could be checked against each other for accuracy. A lot of it was that. Some systems, it was very much a manual control system at that time. It would often mean that you'd just go out and crack a valve at a quarter of a turn or something like that to increase flow or pressure or decrease pressure or whatever was required. Pretty much that was the thing. You'd make rounds every couple of hours and do that. Then if there was any kind of upset or if there was any kind of major transfer of chemicals that had to be done, then I would do it. The junior operator got all the odious jobs. Part of my job involved unloading tanker cars full of hydrogen sulfide, which required you to put on a scott air pack, and I just hated doing that job. You wear all this protective equipment and you can hardly use tools, you're so suited up. But by and large it was a pretty enjoyable job. It was the first job I ever had of that type, so that was interesting to me. ... I was 28 or 27.

Q: Why did you choose to work at Celanese?

GW: I don't know, because they were hiring. But prior to that I'd worked at a lot of industrial jobs. I'd been a surveyor underground in a giant mine in Yellowknife, and a number of jobs like that. But I decided to go back and finish a university degree. I had actually finished a BA, but a BA in anthropology nobody was hiring. Not that I had any

qualifications to be an anthropologist. So I did that job, they were hiring, it was decent industrial wage. I remember they made us take a test, a little written test that required you to, that would ask questions like, if this gear turns like this, what direction will it turn? Those kinds of basic mechanical aptitude questions. I later worked in a number of gas plants and chemical plants, and later on it became really important to have certifications, like some kind of steam engineering ticket, a 4th class ticket, or something like that, which used to be what became the entry as an operator in these plants. But in those days, I don't even remember them saying a word about any kind of certification. I don't think it was required or seen as necessary at the time.

Q: Was there much attention paid to occupational health and safety?

GW: I would say there was, at that time it was probably on a par with other places I'd worked. But in comparison to what happens today with most industrial places, it would've been seen as very lax in terms of occupational health and safety. In terms of environmental things too, things were pretty relaxed. I worked with liquid formaldehyde, and when we'd have an upset or something would go wrong, I personally put formaldehyde into the sewers. That was the only thing we had available at the time, and you knew that just went straight out into the North Saskatchewan River for the folks downstream. At that time, things were very lax in terms of the controls. I don't think there was protective equipment. Things like formaldehyde are really quite nasty things to be around inhaling, so we wore masks of various kinds. Because that's the only way you could work in proximity with the stuff, you tended to use them. But there was no requirement to do so; nobody was telling you you had to wear protective equipment. I would say health and safety at that time was pretty lax.

Q: What protection was there for possible fires?

GW: The interesting thing is, because these places are quite complex and dangerous places, especially if there's a fire, they had an internal fire crew that was trained, and I was part of it at the time. Junior operators, every junior operator in the chemical section, was on the fire crews. The idea there was that you would be trained to handle a fire and that if a fire did break out inside the plant, although the Edmonton fire department would probably respond and perhaps even the Strathcona County would respond at that time, but they would be stopped at the gate. The internal fire crew was supposed to handle most of the stuff. My impression was we didn't take it too seriously; we would consider most of training days as a day away from work. I wouldn't have considered us to be well trained firefighters at the time. But fortunately during the time I was there we never had to respond to a fire.

Q: What were the most dangerous parts of the plant?

GW: It's an industrial plant, and I think just about everywhere inside these plants is dangerous, in that there are things that hurt you, kill you, maim you, and those kinds of things. But I would say the long term effects of some of the things that were handled there would've been, now with hindsight I would say that that was perhaps one of the most dangerous things. I would say things like the cigarette tow that existed in the plant would've been a far more dangerous place to work than our formaldehyde unit. But certainly there were lots of flammable, explosive, corrosive, toxic chemicals within our little formaldehyde unit. That was just one aspect of the plant that I got to know. I would say, I worked in a number of industrial jobs, and these kinds of plants are dangerous

places to work. There's a lot of things that could get you. I would say by and large though, it was a safer place to work than working in the goldmine that I used to work. There was more of an emphasis on, at least the unit I worked in, on maintaining a relatively safe workplace. There wasn't a lot of clutter, there wasn't a lot of debris scattered around, and that kind of thing that could get you. I think the workers there took it seriously. By and large you know these are things that could get you. But you did have what I experienced later, the health and safety person coming down and going through a major inspection and pointing out things. I don't remember that ever happening.

Q: Were safety issues brought up at collective bargaining?

GW: I think health and safety was, and I think especially in those areas of the plant, I know that the women working in the fiber and the cigarette tow areas were, I don't know this for sure, but just anecdotally, it seemed to me that there were greater numbers of injuries in those areas, partly because of the kind of work they did. In the fiber area they'd be changing spindles on machines while they're still running, and threading things through treadles of various kinds, the kind of job that required you to put your fingers in harm's way as a routine thing. My impression was that there was a greater demand coming from that area, but certainly all areas had issues if you talked to them. We all had something.

Q: Some of the least safe jobs were mainly being done by women.

GW: That was my feeling, yes. Because my wife at that time worked there for a couple of months, my impression was she worked harder and in a more potentially dangerous environment than I did. It was in the fiber area.

Q: In the chemical area, was it all men?

GW: All men. I'm sure there were no women working in the chemical area in the operational chemical part. It was mostly women working in the cigarette tow and the fiber section, although there were also some men working there. There was a definite division of labor there.

Q: What was a workday like?

GW: At that time we were working 8 hour shifts; it was shift work. The worst part about 8 hour shifts is that you would work 7 days in a row and then you'd get time off, then another 7 days. You got very few days off, because you spent most of those days recovering from nightshift and that kind of thing. It was really vexatious. One of the things we were asking for at that time was, many of the rank and file were asking for 12 hour days. At that time the union was not sure that the line was, we fought long and hard for an 8 hour day and there's no way we were going back to a 12 hour day. But for 24 hour shift workers, 8 hours just doesn't work well as a way of continuously staffing. So you always end up with really long stretches of time, and rarely get weekends off, and those kinds of inconveniences. To me that was an interesting thing. That's what I remember as one of the pushes that the rank and file really wanted to change the shift schedule.

You get a considerable amount of time off. There are drawbacks to 12 hour shifts for sure, but there are many different ways you can schedule 12 hour shifts to provide 24 hour coverage. So as a result, other places I worked with 12 hour shifts, I don't think I ever worked the same kind of schedule in each of these places. The workers had designed

the shift schedule to whatever would accommodate them. Some of them went for working a fair number of days and then having a long period of time off before they came back. Others wanted to maximize weekends off. You can do those kinds of things with 12 hour shifts; 8 hour shifts, there's not too many ways you can do that and still schedule a full 24 hour coverage and rotation. The big problem with most 12 hour shifts that I've done is that you're switching from days to nights more often, more quickly than you did. Before you would sort of ease into it with an evening shift and then a midnight shift. But with 12 hour shifts you're just completely flipping over, and that can also be vexing. Shift work is just really hard to do. So a day's work was, depending on what shift you were working, if you worked dayshift you worked harder. At that time the engineers would come in and they'd be trying different kinds of tuning for the procedure to increase production or something. So you were always running around. Or there were maintenance people, pipe fitters replacing or changing pumps or doing the kind of basic maintenance stuff. In the off shifts it was much quieter. Although we didn't like working midnight shift, it was actually a pretty calm kind of period of time. Operators knew how to run the thing so that it would just run smoothly. People would leave, all the engineers would leave, we'd tweak this thing down to the known place where there was no turbulence, everything would just run smoothly until the morning. We had a real good feel for how that would run, so you just had to do the routine work. You had lots of time to read, you had lots of time to chat with your coworkers. I enjoyed it, and was lucky enough to be working with Ed Ewasiuk as my partner, who was just a great guy and our local president at the time. At that time, although I'd been working union jobs, I didn't have a lot of experience about, and hadn't paid a lot of attention to union issues and politics and that kind of stuff. I really learned from Ed a lot about issues and how to deal with them, and coping with all the things you have to cope with as a local inside a structure like that. I learned a lot from Ed, and also he was just a great guy to work with. It was for me a very interesting time and I learned a great deal working there.

Q: How many would be working on a shift at any given time in the formaldehyde unit?
GW: Two. Two operators. There would be 2 operators, and then there were during the dayshift there would always be more. The trades people, that would be millwrights, pipe fitters, those kinds of people who would do maintenance on the thing, they were around. There was a foreman too. The foremen had a separate union, the foremen in the plant at that time. Our foreman covered the formaldehyde unit and a number of other places that I can't remember. He did the shift work with us. The idea is he would rotate through the shifts as well, and he suffered along with us. We had a really nice guy for a foreman. Because they had to suffer the shift work along with you, they were really understanding of the kind of stuff that shift work produces, just working really tired and just making it through the night. My feeling was, being an operator is an interesting job, because it's a large complex structure that has to be kept running. Starting it up and stopping it is really something you want to do very rarely, because it's a huge amount of work to stop or start a whole chemical system like that. As a result, it's really important to know how to tweak this thing to keep it running, and when something does go wrong, something fails out there, to be able to bypass systems and improvise ways around completely shutting these things down. I really actually enjoyed learning how to deal with this stuff and understanding how it worked. It was the first job I ever had in that area, so it was quite fascinating.

Q: Do you want to tell us your Grey Cup story?

GW: This is something I'm not proud of. One of the things that happened to me was that I was quite certain they were going to fire me for making this mistake. It was a Grey Cup day and Ed and I were just alone in the formaldehyde unit. One of the jobs that you would do in those days, one of the major raw ingredients in the process was methanol. Out in the tank farm there was a huge tank of methanol that was kept topped up. Once a shift you would go in and transfer from the big tank into a much smaller tank, still a very large structure, maybe 8 or 10 feet tall and about 8 feet in diameter. You'd transfer methanol into that tank. It would take several hours for that to happen. I remember I went out and started the pump to transfer the methanol. Then Ed and I were listening to the game and I forgot all about the transfer that was taking place. Suddenly I remembered and realized that I was doing this, and when I ran out to the tank farm the smaller tank had overflowed, and methanol had spilled on the ground. Fortunately they build dikes around the perimeter of these tanks for just such an occasion, and there was a couple of feet of methanol, incredibly flammable thing, that's just sitting on the ground. It was a Sunday Grey Cup day, so that meant that I had to call out pipe fitters, we had to call out a vacuum truck to pull it up. All kinds of safety people had to show up, fire marshal I think had to show up, because it was a significant event. I have no idea why there couldn't have been a shutoff valve rigged on the top of this tank, but there never was, and presumably no one had ever done this before. I think they actually tried to prevent it after I did that, that they actually rigged up a valve that would sense an overflow and shut off the pump. But anyway, the repercussion from that is that the company gave me a written reprimand. Our collective agreement had said, I can't remember exactly the details, but there was a certain number of days that they had from the event, they were required to give me a written reprimand after that. Theoretically they weren't allowed to. Well it turned out that they missed that cutoff period by one day. So when they called me in to present me with my letter of reprimand, they were a day late. All they did was apologize to me for being a day late. They didn't say anything to me about what I had done; they just handed me the letter and said, gee we're really sorry, we should've had this to you yesterday. So I got to say, well we all make mistakes, that's alright. But that was also a real lesson to be about union, the protection you get from collective agreements and how these things really do work. One of the things that, I wasn't necessarily, although I always supported unions, this really brought home the notion that there is protection there and that the procedures to be following in these kinds of things actually make a difference. It makes a significant difference, in this case. Yep, that was my big mistake.

Q: The work was fairly painstaking.

GW: Yes, it is. It takes quite a while to be able to, the senior operators, the ones who run the control panels and things, actually in those days there was a significant learning curve. You would learn the process but because so little of it, nowadays almost all this stuff is automated, so everything just flows. The computer is figuring out what the optimal pressure needs to be here and adjusting it, and all that stuff is happening. But in those days none of that happened. It was an operator with these little pneumatic controls that would just tweak. They'd have little charts and gauges and things that they would follow to determine how all this stuff would work. They became quite skilled at being able to run these things successfully. During the dayshift the engineers would come in and say, we want to try turning up the pressure on this thing and see if we can increase output. Then that could send the whole thing into fibrillation, and you'd have to be able to

recover from that. I would say that the control process, because it was entirely manual at that time, was actually highly skilled and required a significant amount of experience and on the job training. Every individual unit would be different. You could know how these different reactors worked and distillation towers worked and that sort of thing. But when you put them all in a single unit and have run it smoothly, that's an individual task that is quite complex and requires significant training. I never did get to the point where I was a senior operator in any of the places I worked, I was always the junior guy running around. But you got to know how things worked, but you didn't have the kind of finesse to make it.... The junior operators were the ones who had to go out and when things would break, and invariably things would break and go wrong, we were the people with the big pipe wrenches out there cranking on the valves and putting in bypass arrangements and things like that. We'd do a lot of the legwork and things like that. It is something that requires you to feel comfortable in the place. I would say it took me 4 or 5 months before I really felt like I knew what I was doing completely, so that if anything happened I could cope with it in some way or another.

Q: It was all on-the-job training at that time?

GW: Yes. I don't remember there being any kind of a push towards any kind of certification. Later at other places where I worked, the stationary engineer or 4th class steam engineers ticket would be sort of a basic entry level thing. Certainly today that's true. At that time I can't remember any push at all. I'm not sure, even the senior operators, I'm not sure to what extent they had any formal certification at all. In my case it was completely all on-the-job training.

Q: So you worked there about a year?

GW: I worked there a year, yes. The reason I left was I decided that I wanted to be a schoolteacher, so I decided to go back to university to take education. But I really did enjoy the time that I was there.

Q: You got to see a lot of the plant, being on the fire crew.

GW: One of the nice things about being on the fire crew was that it gave you some entry. During our training periods we'd do field trips to other parts of the plant. They were focused on trying to point out potential hazards and that kind of thing: don't go rushing in that door if there's smoke billowing out, because there's a big vat of acetone on the other side. But I would say I never really got an extensive picture of how other people worked in the plant, but I certainly got more than people who weren't on the fire crew. The experience that I realize, and it's typical of a lot of plants like this, is that you come in the gate and you walk to the part of the plant where you work, and you sit there and you're confined pretty much all the time to that particular part of the plant. So you don't get to know as many people there. I really didn't get to know any of the people in the fiber and cigarette tow areas, except you say hi to them as you were coming and going at the gate, but otherwise no. So unfortunately I don't have a lot of lasting relationships with people that I came into contact with, because I didn't come into contact with a lot of people during that time.

Q: You were an anthropologist, so you must have made some participant observations about the plant.

GW: There were 2 things. One, it was sort of early in my working life. In some ways it was always really interesting to me how the social aspects on the job, it was a place that had a fair immigrant population, so that was always interesting because you'd be working with...when I was on the pentaerithralol line, I think that's where they put people at the very beginning. They threw them in there and if they lasted 2 months they'd say, okay they can probably go somewhere else. Because it was such an awful job. It was interesting, because there was a fair turnover in that area, so there were a lot of new people that you were working with during that time. So for me, one of the interesting things was just being able to meet all these different kinds of people. I would say, I'm not sure I ever would've made a very good anthropologist. But I would say that one of the really interesting things to me was the shift work. This was my first real 24 hour shift type job. When I worked in the mine as a surveyor, I'd work evening shifts and dayshifts, but evening shifts much less often. So this was my first experience of that. One of the things that I realized is that you have to, when you work shift work you get to know people more deeply than you ever thought you would, your coworkers, because you see them in a kind of, well under stress. I think shift work involves a significant stress to the human body. The interesting thing about working with people in shift work is I think you develop a more intimate relationship with your coworkers, just because you get to see them when they're really grump and tired and exhausted and not at their best, and everybody is seeing everybody that way. My experience is that that actually, well it either creates a real bond between people or it creates horrible antagonisms between people. But my experience at Celanese is that it was very positive in that regard. The people I worked with, especially Ed, was somebody that I developed a real deep friendship with. I would say for me that was a real eye-opener, as a young guy, realizing that that's one of the things that happens. At that time my wife worked for a couple of weeks on opposite shifts. That was an interesting exercise of having to cope with the notion that you just didn't see much of each other for a couple of months. That kind of dislocation also is an experience.

Q: Did employees complain that shift work had an impact on family life?

GW: Oh yes. It's especially difficult if there are problems. One of the big complaints would be parents try to cope with the fact that there's a problem with one of the kids. They really need some supervision and they need some attention being spent, and they can't do it. They can't make it to the meet-the-teacher night, and there's all that kind of stuff that gets in the way. So for sure that's always a big issue with shift workers.

Q: It's probably not easy to find people who just want to work nights.

GW: No. I know there are jobs that have that kind of shift work where you start off on nightshift and you're on nightshift until you can bid out of nightshift onto maybe afternoon or days. Although I guess in some ways it creates a more regular routine, I can't imagine doing that. I wouldn't want to work permanent midnights.

Q: Were a lot of the workers quite active in the community?

GW: Possibly, but I don't know that for sure. Ed was very active, and of course he remained active his whole life, doing things. I sort of lost touch with Ed and then one day – we used to live in the northeast end of the city on Stony Plain Rd. One day I answered the door and there was Ed campaigning for, I guess it was the MLA that he was campaigning as. It was such an incredible surprise to see Ed under those conditions, and

realizing that that much had changed between us. So that was really interesting. But other people, I assume there were people doing that, because there always are. It's difficult though, as shift workers, to become terribly involved and volunteer in the community, because it's the kind of thing where you can't attend meetings and that kind of stuff. So it can be difficult, but I think people try. One of the things that I recall as being important to me that I was pushing for was to go to the 12 hour shifts. In those days we were still working 8 hour shifts. That was something that I really wanted to see, because I saw that as an opportunity to get more time off. I think many of the other workers in the plant who worked shift work felt that way. I'm not sure, especially for operators, because it's not on most days it's not that labor intensive. You had plenty of time to sit and read and chat and talk. So 12 hour shift was easily accommodated in those things. I'm not sure that the women working in the fiber section were all that anxious to work 12 hours, because that was really hard physical work. But for us, we were sort of pushing for that. At that time unions were kind of reluctant to see the 12 hour shift as an advance. They felt they'd worked hard enough to get an 8 hour day, and anything would be seen as a step backwards and perhaps companies would use that as an excuse to lengthen the 8 hour day, and that kind of thing. But it's interesting. I think most shift places now operate under 12 hour shifts, because it's just, for shift workers, that's the only way to get days off in any amount.

Q: What was your reaction when the plant closed?

GW: In some ways it was a process that took place as they closed down different sections of the plant. For example, I don't know when they shut down the cigarette tow, but it was quite a while ago that that part went. I was actually kind of sad. It was a good place to work. I think those kinds of jobs are really good jobs. These are the kind of things where these are good places to work, even though now, I think, with automation, the number of operators required to run complex petrochemical operations are really tiny. I drive by the Esso refinery out there after midnight and look at the parking lot, and there's not many people running inside the plant, and it's huge. So fewer and fewer of these jobs are required to do the kind of production that used to require quite a few. But I was sad, actually. And actually remembering, it's been quite a while for me since I did that. It brought back some memories for sure.

[END]