

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Royle Harris

Interviewer: Donalda Cassel

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RH: My name is Royle Harris. I don't use my first name, which was Graham. I don't know, I just got out of the habit. I was born and raised in Edmonton. I'm 65 years old and I've been in the trade union movement since I was 18. I first belonged to I think it was Enginemen and Firemen when I worked on the CNR Railroad, the steam engines. They were one of the last railroads to get rid of their steam engines. I was a watchman, what they called a watchman. You looked after the engine when it wasn't running because you had to go and build up the steam. This was in a little town called Rycroft. My father, who was really anti-union, he just said if I wasn't going to go to school I should go to work. So that's the first job that I got. So that's where I went. It's 50 miles north of Grande Prairie. I didn't know a soul. My mother gave me \$10 and I had \$10. They told me I had to join the union. There was no ifs, buts or maybes about it. It was all part of it. You

joined the union. I worked for them for about two and a half years. I was a watchman, which looked after the engines as I said. I worked as a fireman, which involves shovelling the coal or we used to call them oil burners. We used oil. Some of them were stokers and so on. It was a good life in that, and I think about it now, because of the union. Before I started there, they used to work a 12-hour shift. Not long before I started the just went away from that. That was one of the big gains that the union made, and I remember them talking about it. Then I went to work for the CNR as a callboy.

They used to have, you went out on your bike and you woke up the crews to go to work. Like you'd go to the conductor's house and call him for him to go to work. Usually about two or two and a half hours before the train was to leave, you'd go to his house and call him. It could be any time of the day or night. Some of them didn't want to be phoned.

They wanted somebody to go to their house and wake them up. It was certainly a dying thing, but that's what you did. You did a lot of phoning as well, but you did some of that as you went like on a bike. The office used to be on 1<sup>st</sup> street and 4<sup>th</sup> avenue where that casino is now. Some of them, they lived quite reasonably close to that proximity. The big railroads was in Calder, and I didn't work out of the Calder office thank goodness, because they had to go all over the place to call these guys. Then I became a switchman and I belonged to the Brotherhood of Railroad Trademen. Again, there was no question about it. You just joined the union. The other thing was, I worked with a fairly good union person when I first started. He said, you're not only in the union, you gotta go to the meetings. So I went to the meetings. And that's where I learned about unions when I first started. My father thought this was appalling, that I'd have to be so involved in the union. I said, it's part of my job. My father was an Englishman. My father was an

electrician. My father thought that unions had ruined England and they would be the ruination of this country. He believed that. I never managed to convince him otherwise. It's too bad. I could see the worth of it even then. That would be in the late '50s. In 1961 I went to work for CBC. I was a stagehand and a staging assistant and design processor and a propsman, and all of that. We belonged to IATSE, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, when we first started. I had always worked in the theatre. Ever since I was 5 years old, I did something in the theatre. My mother pushed me out on the stage when I was 5 years old, and I hated it. But I always worked backstage, always did something. My mother was a makeup artist. I used to go with my mother to different things, and I used to put on makeup. I used to put makeup on people, like body makeup, when you've got an opera or something where they're wearing tights or any of that sort of thing. It just progressed from there. I worked in the theatre. I got involved in the theatre. We used to do different shows. Victoria Composite High School was the biggest theatre in town at one point in time until they built the Jubilee Auditorium. So that's how I got involved. So when I still was on the railroad, my dream was to become an ASM, which is an assistant stage manager. I wanted to go to Stratford. Stratford had been in operation for some time then. Stratford, Canada. Stratford, Ontario. So I wrote to them and said, I'll be available to come such and such a day, could you use me, and so on. Of course they wrote me back and said, we need to interview you before we even consider hiring you. So I wrote to the CBC at the same time. If I wasn't going to go to Stratford, I thought I'd write to CBC and see if I could get into Toronto, into television. I didn't know very much about television. I'd done a couple of things at CFRN, the local station, but I didn't know much about it. So CBC wrote me back and said, we're opening a

station in the fall in Edmonton. In the next two weeks we're starting interviewing, so you can go get interviewed. So that's what I did, and I started with CBC in August of 1961. We went on the air in October of '61 and I worked there for 21 years. As I said, we were IATSE originally for the first 10 years, then we went to CUPE. When I first started there were seven unions. I'm trying to remember. There was the Newsmans Guild. Of course the musicians were there. There was NABET, National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians or something, which is almost no more if it isn't no more. They're all CEP now. The Newsmans Guild, etc. So it was quite a conglomeration. When I worked there and CUPE came along, and CUPE handled the, it wasn't a raid of us. They talked to us. Are you interested? And we were open. IATSE sort of treated us offhand because they were a stage and film local more than they were television. When television first started in this country, and it started in Montreal, they thought it would only last about six months. So there was no real desire to get firmly engrossed in any sort of unions or anything like that as far as the employer, the CBC, was concerned, and so on. So IATSE, while they looked after us, they didn't look after us that well because they're a big international union. IATSE has come a long way and so on, but CUPE was better for us because they took more of an interest in us. And ACTRA was the announcers and the office staff and that, they amalgamated with us, which were the production people, and we all became CUPE and we had some strength and so on. We had, during the time that I was there, three strikes that I can think of that were our own. Plus our technicians, the DAVET people went out. You know Merle Schnee, of course. He used to be with the firefighters. Merle Schnee is an institution of his own in this city, in the New Democratic Party and in Labour at one time. But they all came to our picket

line one time in their firefighters' uniforms and they all got suspended. Another time we were on strike and the Local 30 guys came and they had to shut the water off into the CBC because there was a leak somewhere in the line they figured. So here was poor old CBC with no water. They had to get portable toilets and every time one of the management people came out to use the toilet, these portable toilets which were at the side of the parking lot, we jeered, screamed at them and everything. Oh we had a great time. That was the kind of support that you can think of.

Q: What were the strikes about?

RH: Well seniority, contracting out, money, the usual things. As time went on, we got really quite good agreements. CBC was very, very difficult to negotiate with because there was a very large management contingent at CBC. I think the ratio between workers and managers was something like two and a half to one or something. It was incredible. We had a guy at our building, he had nothing to do but look after the phones. He was a management person. It was just incredible at one time. So when you went into negotiations with them, there'd be 32 of them sitting at the table. Then of course the other part of it was, that they couldn't make a friggin' decision. Here we were, I mean we were mandated as any trade unionist is when they go to negotiations, with what we want. We say yes or no and we'll take it back to our members. But these guys would have to go to the principals. So it would drag on and on and on and on. I'd get so frustrated. Because Barry Davis, who was our rep and our spokesperson, wouldn't let us talk at the table. There was no talking. You could pass him a note or whatever. I used to get so frustrated. I'd just be like a kettle ready to blow. It was a very difficult task. I mean those were the things. And **CBC, even back in those days, was really looking to get contractors. The**

more contractors they could get, the better. They wanted the announce staff all on contracts. They didn't mind paying them a little more money to be on contract, but of course when they're on contract they didn't get any benefits or anything. You take Nolton Nash, for example. When he was reading the news, he was a member of our bargaining unit. He was the highest paid news member, because he was getting over \$90,000 a year. But see they wanted everybody contract, because if there was a change of producer, like if you were the announcer on the morning show and I came along and I was the producer, I'd say, well we want a different look to our morning show Donald, so you have to leave. Here's your two weeks notice, and you'd be gone. And I'd hire Winston because we want that sort of look or that sort of sound. And that happened all the time. So the announce staff, as they left, they were never replaced as permanent employees. There's only now at CBC Edmonton two permanent announce people. There's no crew to speak of. They all bring them in on contract. That's the way of the future for broadcasting. Anyway for myself, I worked there 21 years as I said. I got involved in the union because I shot my face off at one meeting and you know how that is. Because we were a national union, we were right across the country representing CBC workers right across the country, everything was done out of the CUPE office in Ottawa. So if you got involved on the national level at all, you were travelling back and forth to Ottawa. It reached a point with me that my boss used to come to me and say, could you give us your schedule for union work for the next two months so I can schedule things when you're going to be here as opposed to being in Ottawa or Toronto or somewhere like that, because of my participation. I was on the negotiating committee. I was on the job evaluation committee. I was a member of the executive of the broadcast division of

CUPE, sat on the grievance committee off and on. I would be away from home at least one week out of the month every month, sometimes more. I met and fell madly in love with a lady from Ottawa. She moved out here to be with me and then she moved back to Ottawa because I was never home. But you make these sacrifices because you believe that's the best for the most. As a result of that, I became a staff member of CUPE. Harley Horn was the regional director in Alberta. I was with broadcast at the time, and we had a school, a big school in Banff. It was the same thing would interest you, Donaldda. It was the very first year they had equal opportunities conference. The CLC put it on. I can't remember the year, I'm sorry, but it was at the Banff Springs Hotel. And it was incredible, because CUPE was one of the movers and shakers. Grace Hartman was the president at the time. We had an Equal Opportunities Officer for the first time. It was incredible, it really was. It really, really brought those things forward. We had the school, which just happened to be at the same time, was a broadcast school. So Harley Horn was the regional director as I said. Then he came over. He would come over from the conference to see us at the school and so on. The following fall, we had our national convention in Winnipeg, and he took me for lunch. He used to come every day and visit us. You know how it is at a convention, you all sit with your own. I was sitting with the broadcast people, and he came one day and said, come and have lunch with me. So we had lunch in that horrible, horrible cafeteria at the Winnipeg Convention Centre. He paid for lunch. So when we were leaving I said, well let me pay at least my share of lunch, because broadcast division was generous with their per diems, so I was quite flush. No, no, it's fine. I said, well Harley, it's only fair. And he said, no, when I give a job interview, I pay for lunch. My reaction was exactly the same as yours, Donaldda, that I

was very surprised. I said, what are you talking about? He said, we want you to come and work for us. That's how I got started in CUPE. I took a leave of absence from CBC and every six or five years I kept redoing my leave of absence until finally CBC said to me, look we know we have to keep a job for you, that's a contractual obligation we have. But we're laying off people. It's not really fair to hold a job for you when we're laying off people. So that of course touches your conscience and so I resigned. But it was interesting. I had come out of broadcast sort of a very narrow focus group, because we were focused on our own problems. I travelled across Canada right from Vancouver to Newfoundland and back to Toronto in something like seven days giving presentations one time, all about job evaluation and so on. So that's how focused and narrowly focused. To come into CUPE, which was such a broad spectrum of hospital workers and garbage people and engineers and airlines people and on and on and on. I remember when I started. One rep took me to a meeting out at a municipality. Another rep took me out to Vegreville to meet with the local out there, and he left me there. I was a little concerned. But it never, I never to this day, and I'll take it to my grave, how it amazes me the true dedication of the members that we have. Here's like Vegreville, there's a lot of people there that English is their second language. Yet they could almost, this one lady said she could almost recite the health and safety code backwards to you. Just things like that. There's such dedication and such caring. They look after the girls. That, anybody who's not inspired by that is just, it's just unbelievable. Not long after I came on staff, within a couple of years, we were looking at a provincial strike in our hospital field, which included the nursing homes and so on. I'll never forget being in Vegreville and talking about this. They voted hands down for a strike. They weren't worried about getting



organized for picketing or anything like that. They were worried about who would take who home to look after them while they were on strike. They had the residents of the nursing home and they knew who could leave so these people could look after them. Because they weren't going to leave their residents. They were prepared to support their union and so on, but they were going to take the job home with them because they just couldn't have those residents do without them. But at the same time, they wouldn't cross a picket line. Just incredible. That's inspiring. It truly is inspiring, you know. You get so motivated. I can't see how people can't be motivated when things like that are. You remember the Gainer strike? I'll never forget standing on the curb and the police squad came and they had the shields and the clubs and they pounded the pavement with their feet. I get shivers just telling you about it. Then when they came and they just went down the rows of us on the curb and said, and took every third person standing there. Didn't matter who they were, they took them. There was a woman lives just down the street from us and they grabbed her. They took her. Her little girl was there, probably eight or nine year old girl. The girl was screaming and we yelled at the officer and we went into the street and grabbed him and said, you can't take this woman, it's her little girl. He said, I have to do my orders. I have to do as I'm told. The Sergeant came. Finally we convinced them. I said, I'll go. It doesn't matter. It was just a horrible, horrible situation. Then the rally we had, and probably the biggest rally I've ever been involved in, the one at the steps of the legislature when we had over 10,000 people there. And you were so proud. You were so proud to be involved in something like this that could do some good for everybody. We thought it would. So they got, was it Ian Reid was the minister, and they went around the country, going to change the labour laws. Had all of these hearings

and so on. What a sham it was. What an absolute sham it was. It was terrible. It was absolutely terrible how they treated these people. It seems like it's always trying to push a snowball up a hill. I sometimes like to live in Quebec where they don't use scabs, that sort of thing.

Q: Talk about the formation of CUPE.

RH: CUPE came out of an amalgamation. Oh god I've taught this course and you're asking me. I can't remember the proper title for the two unions that merged. A guy by the name of Stan Little was our first president. They had their convention, their second or third convention in this very hotel. That would be in the late '60s. They merged and became CUPE. I think it was their second or third convention they had here in this hotel because we had just become part of CUPE and I remember being here. We were trying to set up a booth to display things for broadcast. They came and bawled us out because we were making noise while the president was speaking. So that's why I remember it so distinctly. Then Grace Hartman became president. Then following Grace was Jeff Rose. Then Judy Darcy. We've had a variety and all good in their own way. Certainly good to the trade union movement.

Q: What has been the greatest impact on you being involved in the union?

RH: I suppose the biggest impact for me, and it doesn't matter where I go and I get really emotional about it, is the people. The members. I could go to a meeting, or I remember going to a meeting, and I would be talking about something. Everybody would look at me and say, and they'd be quiet. Who the hell am I to be all of a sudden such an authority? Here's these people that work so hard and so on, and care and carry the load. Yet I'm just one of you. I'm not anybody special. I suppose that has the biggest impact on me. This

has happened to me and I don't care where it is, in Vegreville or Whitehorse or whatever. When I first started with CUPE, I had the largest servicing area of any rep, because I had all the Northwest Territories and everything. I had locals all around Edmonton, but then I had Whitehorse and Yellowknife and Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk. Never went there, because CUPE wouldn't spend the money to send me. I always wanted to go. I used to do it all by conference calls. But it was just amazing. I did go to Whitehorse and I did go to Yellowknife and help them out. Back to your question, and even, it doesn't matter, and I'm sure Donald if you stop and think about it yourself, it's the associations you make, the people. I mean, some of them aren't the best sometimes. It troubles me when we walk picket lines and lose these people. But it's the people themselves. It's the association with people who believe the same as you believe deep down inside. The best way that I can put that is, sometimes I think we've done our job too well. Because what we're faced with in our union movement now, when I think about the almost 35 or going on to 40 years that I've been involved in the union movement, we years ago we didn't have the benefits. We used to have an eight page collective agreement and so on. Now everything is covered. We've done such a good job. We collectively we, I don't mean me and you, I mean collectively we. We couldn't have done it without the support. But we've done such a good job that we don't have the interest of the members like we used to have because they don't need it anymore because it's all there for them. When I first started at CBC we didn't have a pension. No pension. On the railroad we didn't have a pension. It's a common thing now. So what I'm saying is that certainly there's the fights there and they need to be fought. We need to not only gain more for our members but we need to protect what we have. But it's hard to motivate the members now because it's the

difference between hamburger and steak. They get used to eating steak and they don't want the hamburger anymore. But when it was hamburger, they wanted the steak and they really, really were there with the support to do it. But now as you well know, you're looking at an average of 10-15% of a membership at a meeting. They're there when the struggle is there, but on a regular basis, no. Because they don't need to be, because the work has been done. I remember when I first started going out into the country. I'm a city boy. I'd live in downtown Edmonton today if I could. But I thought to myself god, I'm going have to go to Wainwright. What the hell does a person do at night in Wainwright? I imagine they have a hockey rink and a curling rink, but that's about it. You try and get free time with those people. We had to slot our meetings in between ceramics, bowling. A couple of people had to take their daughters to go and learn how to be babysitters. I mean it was, they're so busy. It was such an eye opener to me. But there wasn't a question of not having a meeting, but it had to be scheduled in such a way that we could start at 7:30 but they convinced us, the ceramics teacher, who was also a member of CUPE from the school board, not to start till quarter to nine because they could all go, after the union meeting could go to ceramics at quarter to nine. It's true. But it wasn't that they didn't have the interest. It was you had to slot these things. And they were there. Slowly the attendance has gone down. Like I say, it troubles me. We in CUPE have the organizing the organized in CUPE, which we work at to try and get members to see how beneficial it is to be together. Certainly we're together when we're needed to be, but on a regular basis, no. It's sad.

Q: What do you see as some of your achievements?

RH: I sat on a ton of committees. I think of the different arbitrations I did. I think of the board hearings I did. But I suppose one of the achievements, we talked about it on the convention floor today, CLAC. CLAC must have a picture of me on their wall somewhere, because I've convinced three different CLAC groups to come to CUPE, to come to a real union. I'm real proud of that. CLAC is Christian Labour Association of Canada, I believe. They're more in the building trades, but they're also in the nursing homes. The employers really love them, because they're principled, they're Christian and they don't believe in any sort of confrontation. This is what they believe. They have the Save-On Foods here, and they're the ones that started, if you wanted to look back in history, remember when Safeway workers went out and the only way they could resolve it was to take that huge humongous rollback? CLAC started that with Save-On Foods. That's where it started. CLAC just bent over and said, ok fine, give it to us, we'll take it. You convince them by showing them the benefits of a real union, of the fact that we were able to really make gains within. And these are the nursing homes that are extended care nursing homes, which is a private employer. They're so rich. They bought an insurance company. They bought Crown Life. Crown Life didn't buy extended care, extended care bought Crown Life. They're so rich, and yet they wouldn't give the workers anything to which they were entitled to. It's so difficult for these people who work in nursing homes. And they convinced them that, you deserve a lot more than this. When you've got an organization such as you belong to, that's practically in bed with the boss, well then certainly you're not serving yourself, your family or anybody any good by doing that. The building trades have the same problem. CLAC is big time in the building trades. Why I don't know. But in a round about way of getting back to your question, that was

one of the things that I got a lot of enjoyment out of. You always get, you know we lose so many, when you win one it really feels good. And there are just times that when you're defending somebody that you know is just really shouldn't be. But you take the good with the bad, is what you do.

Q: Do you ever have second thoughts about something you've done?

RH: Always. Always. Particularly when you work out of town, and say you've been in negotiations in the town of Wainwright. You're driving home and it's the middle of the night, you think to yourself, well if I'd said this maybe they would've done that, and so on. You always have second thoughts. I never doubted my own ability to do the absolute best I could for the members, because I believe in them so strongly and they believed in me. But I do have regrets that I maybe wasn't better educated, that I didn't know more about some of the things that I should have. The whole thing with benefits and pensions, there's a field to itself that is just mind-boggling. So you just do the best you can.

I'm really troubled by the division that's in the labour movement in this province right now because I think that we haven't seen the worst of times in this province. I think that this government has not gone after the municipalities at all. They went after the school boards, they went after the hospitals and so on. But I don't think they've gone after the municipalities yet. I think that may come. I think there may be a right to work legislation or something like that. There's all of those sorts of things. And if we're divided, we're not as strong. With the stroke of a pen, and I saw with my very own eyes, the letter that came from (Steve) West with the 5% reductions. There was no more than maybe three lines in that letter that said, as of this date we are directing you that we are reducing our funding to you at the municipality by 5%. This 5% was directly related to wages. That's

all the letter said. I saw it, and it was written by West. That's how blatant they are.

There's no thought. There's no nothing. And if everybody had to take that 5% rollback.

That's how arrogant they are. That's how they could treat us. So I'm worried about the

division, because we could be much stronger . There's wonderful, wonderful people in

the trade union movement. Certainly we have our differences. But that's what it's all

about. Because we learn and we build and so on, and that's, and I just worry that people

just don't care enough.

Q: Who are some of the people you admire?

RH: Well I have to look at my own. I spoke about Harley Horn. He was a wonderful

man. I remember his funeral. He was our regional director. He was an engineer from a

power plant, at a hospital is where he started. Harley, at his funeral, I'll never forget, I've

never seen so many flowers at a funeral. There were flowers all over the place. I asked

one of the reps from Calgary, because this was in Calgary, why all these flowers? Why

didn't the money go to some cause? She said to me, I don't know but I'll find out. They

asked Harley's wife. Harley didn't want people donating. He said that he believed that it

was the workers that donated the most to the charitable causes, that he believed that

people with a lot of money, the only time they donated to anything was to get their name

on a building or something. He believed that the workers gave too much, and he didn't

want that. That's the kind of individual he was. Dave Werlin in his day was probably one

of the best orators that you could listen to. I would have walked across a river with Dave

Werlin. He moved me so much. I think of him. I think of my own Diane ?, who's our

boss at this time, who's so dedicated, cares so much, and suffers so much. She suffers

with our losses and she enjoys our gains. There's so many. Winston (Gereluk) is another

one. There's a tireless, tireless person. These people influence you. You can't help being influenced. Being part of the labour movement and being part of the social democrats is really, really important to me. My very dear friend Bill Chivers, who supported me so long, one of the best labour lawyers in this province. There's an incredible list of people. I wish, and maybe this is something I'll do in my retirement, is we should start to get a list of star contributors to the labour movement. The only problem with that is you might miss somebody. That's the only problem. But I don't know whether that answered your question or not. But there are so many people. I just feel that I've been so damn fortunate to be even just a small part of this. It just blows me away even as I said to this day, that I've been able to do what I've been able to do.

Q: What has been the most gratifying thing about being involved in the labour movement?

RH: Donalda, I have to be honest. The most amazing or the most gratifying thing to me is when you go and do a ratification vote, and they come up to you after and say thank you. I've done so many I couldn't count anymore how many I've done. You can do it with 20 people or 200 or whatever, and there'll be that small few that always come up and thank you. That means so much. That's probably the most amazing thing. I could give you story after story about going in front of the Labour relations Board and getting so angry that I was just ready to go up and hit the chairman. That's not my nature at all, those sort of things. But when it comes right down to it, the most amazing thing is to see the gratification from the people we represent. I just think this is an absolutely wonderful project that you people are embarking on, and I'm very pleased that I could be a small part of it. I remember working Revene in a spotlight and he hypnotized me along with



everybody else. It was in the old Strand Theatre. He does a mass sort of thing. Then the people that really get into it, he calls out of the audience. But I guess I wasn't really hypnotized but I was certainly mesmerized to the point where I was out of it. I couldn't do my job. Nothing. That's just one thing. There's so many different things. God almighty. Well we used to have so much fun. You can't say this in the interview, but you remember yourself, when going to work was fun. You had time to visit with your colleagues and to involve yourselves with their lives and how things were going. Now it's just work work, work, work, work. There's so much pressure to let's get it done, let's wake this little old lady up at five o'clock in the morning and give her a bath because there's no other time to do it. It's just the whole climate has changed. I don't know how you get that back.