

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Tets Kitaguchi

Interviewer: Don Bouzek and Joan Schiebelbein

Date: 28 October 2005

Location: Hinton, AB

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TK: My name is Tets Kitaguchi. I was born in Evansburg in 1918. My father came to Canada about early part of the century, around 1906. He was taken to the island of Vancouver. They hired him on there at Cumberland Mines. It was called Coal Harbor. He was a coalminer in Japan too, that's why he come over here. A bit of an adventurous fellow too.

Q: Was that an underground mine?

TK: I couldn't tell you if he was underground or not at that mine. I wasn't born there. I was born in Evansburg. All I knew was several mines there. When he come to Cumberland he migrated to Canada along with some Italians and Chinese. There was the odd black fellow that worked in the mines there. I guess they had a lot of turmoil in the mines at one time, the immigrants. They were all separated in this place called Cumberland, the Italians in one section, and so on. They were all segregated there. Then the labour strike as well as racism was getting to him. So he come out here to Evansburg,

that was around 1910 or '11, when the mine was discovered in Evansburg. He was hired on by a fellow by the name of Jack MacLellan. They recruited these miners that wanted to get out of Cumberland because of the labour strike. This is how we come to live in Evansburg. There was one activist shot there in Cumberland, and that was a little too much for him.

Q: What was Evansburg like?

TK: It was a nice place to be living, a quiet town. Except for Saturday nights – you know what a mining town is like. Tough miners. They drank hard, they worked hard. It was just a regular little village. Of course it was a mining town, so the homes were all built by the mining company. You lived in mining homes. They were 4 rooms and the outhouse.

There was no running water, no sewage. They had a well every so many houses down the alley. There was no sewer system. It was heated by wood and coal. In my family then there was 8 of us at that time. Then later on there was 9. Then we had an extra garage we made into an extra room in the summertime. The veranda was all boarded up with screens and we lived out there. It was pretty crowded, very crowded.

Q: Did you go to school there?

TK: Yes, there was a high school there. Going to high school in the district they'd come from Wildwood and around the area. Evansburg happened to be the centre of that place at that time. Coal was king then.

Q: Did you ever work in the coal mine?

TK: My first job was there. I worked in a tippie. At that time I was only about 16 or 17 years old. I worked in a tippie. But that was summer work, not regular. It was an underground mine, and the coal was brought up into the tippie and tipped over into a car

that brought it out into a sorting deck. We picked up the bone coal, which is mixed with the good coal. We had to take the bone coal out. That was my job. In fact there was three or four of us kids picking coal off the table. Bone coal means it's coal mixed in the rock, and these are no good. Of course there's a good piece of coal within the rock, but it's called bone and taken out. Good coal, shiny coal. We knew the difference, you could see the bone in it right away.

Q: Was the mine unionized?

TK: There was no union there. That's a long time ago. The mine shut down in '36. We worked around the farms. A lot of homesteads there, so we went root picking, opening up the land. We were paid \$5 a month. That was your dinner. That was our job for a whole year. In 1937 we decided there's no jobs here, so we'll take a ride out to BC. We hopped the freight, my two brothers and a friend of ours, we hopped the freight and went to Vancouver and looked for a job there. It wasn't very good there either for a while. We went to one big sawmill that we heard of, I think he called it the Fraser Mill. We waited in the yard. A guy came along and said, are you guys looking for a job? I said, ya. He says, where's your bottle of whiskey? Rusty says, why do we need a bottle of whiskey? He says, if you want to see the boss, most people bring a bottle of whiskey. That was the end of that. We said to hell with this. We got out of there, and hung around Vancouver for another day or two. I said, I'll stay here for two more days and if I don't find anything, I'll go back to the farms. But my big brother found a job in a pulp mill there. So we went out there and got a job, all three of us. By that time Rusty, he went up the ocean. He wasn't going to pay no bottle of whiskey for a job. That was a bad thing in those days, bribing people for jobs.

Q: What was your job there?

TK: My job was in the machine room. That's where they did the baling of the pulp, packing up the pulp. We held that job, it was about the mid '40s, no it was '37. The war come on in '39, and we got a notice to get out all Japanese. So I only worked there 4-1/2 years, then we had to pack up and get out of the area, coastal area, 100-mile zone, they called it.

Q: Were you allowed to take your belongings?

No. Myself I had a lot of stuff like an accordion and books, I had a good collection of books. You were only allowed one suitcase and one duffle bag. So I sold my accordion right there on the wharf, and I don't know what happened to the rest of the stuff.

We had to go Vancouver and then register in Hastings Park. We were called enemy agents, which I could never understand. We were all registered there, and wait for the time to be evacuated out from the coastal area. We had an option there. If we knew somebody in the agricultural area of Alberta or anywhere outside of BC, we had an option to put our name in and go there. So we went to Raymond, because I had a sister married in Raymond and living there for a number of years. In that way we were lucky to go somewhere that we knew someone, and a little support there too.

Q: What was the crop on the farm?

TK: It was all sugar beets. We were all designated for beet labour. The wife and I, we went to one farm there that the quota was 25 acres that we had to handle. If you had a big family you'd probably get 100 acres, and you'd get a percentage of that from the farmer, whatever they get. We went there and they showed us the place we had to stay, a one-room shack about this size. We had one bed and a stove. You could sit on the bed and

cook on the stove. It must've been an old granary at one time. It was a filthy place. We lived in that. From the time it was planted, we waited until they sprouted up 2 leaves. Then you go out there with a hoe and separate all the beets to about 12 inches apart. It was a backbreaking job, especially for my wife. Never been on a farm or anything. I used to break in the heart when I see her work. It was tough. During the fall, around September, this is very nice weather, I says to the farmer, why don't you harvest it? The weather's great. He said, oh we can't do that. We wait for the first frost to bring up the content of the sugar. So that was harder still. We got to pull those things out of the ground, bang them together, get all the mud off them. It was tough work, but we got it all harvested. After harvest we were paid our share. The wife and I, we ended up with \$90 to live on through the winter. But we were kind of lucky. He was one of those kind of guys that took in the cattle or sheep during the winter months from the stockyard and fattened them up, then sent to the packers. So he hired me on for \$25 a month through the winter. It was good. We managed. The war ended August 8th, 1945. We were free to go. So the farmers there, they clamoured for good help. One of the guys asked me to come back and stay on the farm, said that he would give me a share of his farm if I stayed. But that wasn't the one with the beets. He was a grain farmer. I said, no, I had enough of farming. We were allowed to move anywhere after that. My brother found a job in a lime kiln. That's where I ended up after the war. The first job working in the lime kiln, which is situated right on the BC-Alberta border. The head office for Lime Works happened to be in Lethbridge, at the centre of the sugar beet industry. So they hired people that were coming off the beet fields. They had a great choice of people, because they were all scrambling for jobs to get off the farm. We got the job up in Lime Works, my brothers

and I and their families. So we moved up there. But the big disappointment was they told us we'd having housing there, but the home that we had was not much better than the shack we left. In fact, they were worse. But we had no choice but to stay because it was a job for the time being. That time being lasted 10 years. During that time I was never involved in union work or anything like that. We met with these people that had been working there for a number of years, these men. They come from the Baltic states, like Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia. Some of them couldn't speak English, but been there for a long time. We learned a lot about this place. I thought, how come you're living in these shacks for so long? He said, we tried to talk about improving things, and we were told if they made any kind of racket about their work, they would be deported. I thought, that's not right. We learned more and more about the place. The manager there never lived there at all, just the foreman. The owner owned a big ranch and was quite wealthy. The foreman there was Yugoslav too, but he'd been in Canada for some time and spoke perfect English. They were exploiting these immigrants, when they told them that they'd be deported. So they approached us. What I mean by us is ?, he was a university student who was just working there, and myself and my brothers. But my brother wouldn't have nothing to do with that kind of work. I didn't either. I was never a union man. But somehow it grew on me, the things I'd seen throughout the years. I said, you fellows want a better standard of living, you're going to have to get a union in here. I don't know how to get a union myself because I've never been involved. I says, the first thing you have to do is contact a representative of some union. So I happened to know a couple of fellows in Coleman who were coal miners. They put me onto Jack Evans. He belonged to some chemical union. He came to visit us and said, you want a union? I said, ya, these fellows

here want a union. They want better living conditions. Ya, I can see that right now, the minute I come in here I was wondering what those shacks were. I said, they're homes. It was all company owned. Jack said, you've got to have 51% to sign up to get a union in here. So I said, okay. I had a problem there, because these people come from Croatia, Bosnia, and that has a history of people that never got along for years. The only reason why they got along was because Tito kept them under his thumb. But these people come back to Canada, they still have that ill feeling towards one another. But we managed to sign everybody but two of them. We still needed the 51% for next morning. Jack was coming back to get this signed petition. During the night I said, we gotta get hold of those two guys somehow. Almost midnight I went to their home and said, you gotta sign this. He was a real grump. He wouldn't sign anything. Young fellow and his wife. But he finally signed it. I guess that bothered him for a couple of days at work. One night at work, he didn't like me at all, he was going to clobber me with an iron pipe. But I had a friend with a black belt behind me, grabbed him and threw him against the wall. Kinda shook him out and straightened him out a bit. He said, we're not going to get anywhere, you just make trouble for us. Never mind, I said, we'll find out what's going to happen. So he signed it, we got a union. Jack notified the company that you have a union, now you deal with a union. So we were called down to Lethbridge, to head office, with a proposal of what we wanted, which is very easy. We went down there. It opens like this, the door to his office. We were sitting there discussing things. He had a lawyer by the name of Gladstone. I don't think he'd ever dealt with a union all his life. He says, what are you guys looking for? I says, it's all on the paper there. He says, maybe we should think about this. I told him, before we think about it, Mr. Gladstone better come there and have a look

at the place, then he'll know what we're talking about. The owner roared, come in here, to his secretary. So they went in. I wonder what they're going to talk about? He says, when I invited a man up to see the place, that's when he hollered from the other office, come in here. They come back out and says, you guys can go home now. We'll think about this and call you back. So we left and went back in five days. He says, we'll have another meeting. Come back and he says he'd give us everything we wanted and then some. We had them in a place where nobody wanted to see his employees living in them. This lawyer apparently never seen these shacks. So we got everything we wanted. In two meetings we had it all settled. But it took another year and a half before they built new homes. They built them out of cinder bricks and some out of wood.

Q: What did the miners think when you got the deal?

TK: They were happy, because they got more money. And they were promised a new home. And we got them too. Within three years they were all built. They had something like 30 families there. I stayed there till 1957. But in the meantime, our children were bused to Coleman to school. The school board figured we should have a representative down in Coleman, because we had children going there. On the school board was a vacancy. So the bus driver by the name of ?, he says, you better run for the school board. I says, no way, I had enough stuff running around. He says, you got kids going to school there, and the teachers union want a representative on the board. I said, well I'm not going to be campaigning down there. It's nine miles. Anyway a week or two later he come back and said, you're drafted. I said, what do you mean, drafted? He said, you're going to run for the school board. I said, ok we'll see what happened. I never went door to door or anything. The people who wanted me in were the teachers union. They did all the work

and I got in by a big majority. I knew they wanted a union representative on the board. I found out later I had a hunch why you want me so bad, they were going for a new contract. Level the playing field off a bit with the union on the board. I got on the board and they got everything they asked for.

Q: Did this happen when you were still at Lime Works?

TK: Yes, I was working at Lime Works. Then after that it wasn't long before I decided to come up here because of the pulp mill.

Q: Did you become involved in the union here?

TK: I didn't get involved, but I was in there. I kept a low profile, but I was a good union man. I still am a good union man. I still believe in a good union.

Q: Why did you leave Lime Works?

TK: The lime rock is put through these big furnaces and they come out white. That's where your white lime is cooked in kilns. It was a bad job. That's why I quit there. the lime dust was breaking down the membranes in my nose, and it would never heal. So the doctor said, you'd better get out of here. So, I came here and signed up as a member. I was a bleach operator. That involves the whitening of the pulp, the finished product. The finished product is when they bale it, but I mean the finished product before they bale it is bleached white.

Q: What was the mill called at that time?

TK: Northwest Pulp and Power to start, then St. Regis, then Champion. It changed hands a few times since then. I retired in '83. It's now called the West Fraser Pulp Mill.

Q: Did you ever go on strike when you worked at the mill?

TK: Oh there was one walkout, that's all. That's early years when I first come here. They got along pretty well. The union did a pretty good job here keeping things the way they wanted.

Q: What was the name of the union?

TK: Pulp and paper, something like that. My computer isn't working very good.

Q: What were the working conditions like?

TK: When we started up the mill it was horrible, because of all the bugs in the lines and nothing worked right. The gas would come up, and we were gassed quite a few times. We survived. After it was straightened out it was good.

Q: How long did you work there?

TK: Twenty-six years. I thought it was good. Of course you always find the odd one say it's not good. Myself, I had no complaints. They kept up new machines. The personnel changed too. Each time the company changed they'd get rid of the top men.

Q: Did you do the same job the whole time you worked there or did you change jobs?

TK: Same job. I worked with a bunch of fellows that just kept me young. I really enjoyed work. Never had a dispute with any of the workers. When I retired they threw a dandy party for me, the company and union together. I went through there twice since I retired, but my operations on my hip, I had a few operations, and that kept me tied down a bit. But I was still active in a lot of other things, along with the wife. She was my biggest supporter.

Q: You were active in the community here in Hinton?

TK: Oh yes. Throughout the time they had the Optimist Club here. There was service work for the young people. I spent my holidays for 8 years going to their conventions,

one in the spring and one in the fall, Easter break. The wife and I were pretty active, and the wife is active in the community, different organizations – Girl Guides and stuff like that.

Q: Have you experienced any discrimination?

TK: No, we didn't find that here in Hinton. In fact the wife and I have always made friends with people, and we never felt that discrimination. Though it was there, I guess. My biggest shock was when I went to work in wood fiber in BC. I never knew the discrimination there was that bad. That's before the war. When I got a job in wood fiber, they had a two line wage scale, one for the Japanese and one for the whites, which I never realized until I got the third or fourth pay.

Q: What happened to your brothers after the war?

TK: One brother come to Crowsnest with me and the other one went to Ontario, Toronto. He got a job in a meatpacking plant. He got involved in lots of strikes there with the meatpackers. Pretty bad ones, too. Throwing knives, right in the plant. I went down there one year and he said, c'mon see where I work. I went there. I heard a certain holler. I didn't know what it was. Oh there it goes again. What's that? He says, that's like in the ?? some kind of trouble, on the floor there 2 guys with knives facing each other. They broke it up pretty quick. But that resulted from strikes, that hatred carried on. Scabs, they get back into work, they're never the same friend that they were once.

Q: Do you have children?

TK: We lost our son 3 years ago, Dennis. He was a good musician. He lost his battle with cancer. But I still have a daughter living here, working at the Bank of Nova Scotia. She's a great help. We're getting on. My wife is 89, and I'm 87. I'm in the process now, been at

it for four years, writing the history of my family. I'm still working on it. I can't write like I used to. My eyes go blurry and I have to quit. I write about a half hour or an hour. Not every day, right now with baseball season. My wife and I both like the same thing. She loves sports. She played good basketball at one time, when she was in Vancouver, and used to play in Spokane and places like that. She's a great athlete. Her brother George, she used to catch baseball for him when he was a kid. She's the youngest baby of the family. George was just inducted into the Hall of Fame, Canada baseball. He couldn't make it there. His sister had to represent him. He was sick. It was just a matter of months after that he had died. George Oshanaka of Lethbridge. Mr. Baseball of Lethbridge. Inducted the same time as Carter and a couple of others for the Blue Jays.

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