

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Wally Land, Member of CEP Local 855 in Hinton, AB
Interviewer: Dave Werlin
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My name is Wally Land. I'm a member of CEP Local 855 in Hinton, Alberta. My best friend's dad was president of CN Freight in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. So between grade 11 and 12, I worked there, and I had a job the day after graduation. I'm a member of one of the CN unions. I started out my working career in a union job.

Q. How did you first get involved in trade unionism?

I didn't have to develop that attitude. Just a few weeks after hiring on, we were on strike. So I went through the whole strike at headquarters and picket duty, all that. So I didn't really have a sour taste in my mouth about unions. I was actually quite impressed with the organization and the dedication and everything. And the caring that actually went on. So it was positive from day one.

And when we went on strike here a few years ago, there was very few people who had actual strike experience, besides walking the odd picket line. Most of the people who work here have grown up and worked here their whole lives. There's a few people, but we didn't have a whole lot of strike experience. Mind you that was a long time ago for me. But at least I'd been through it.

Q. How did you come to live in Alberta?

My parents had moved to Grande Cache, working in the coalmine. I decided I was going to further my education, so moved to Grande Cache to work as a summer student and go to school. That's why I moved. I got working and I went to school for one semester, but I came back and went to work. Once you start getting your paycheck, it's hard to go back to school. It's just a tough thing to swallow. So I started working in the coalmine and I worked there for 10 years – 5 years underground and 5 years in the coal preparation plant.

Q. What union did you have there?

United Steel Workers of America.

Q. What was it like working in a coal mine?

It was a tough job. It was nothing like I'd ever experienced before, although I'd only really had one job. But mining is dangerous, coal mining is very dangerous.

There was one instance where, it was a coalmine pillar retreat method underground. They put pieces of wood in the sides of the entryways, called lagging, to protect the rib from sloughing in and blocking the road. A guy was walking into work one day and the rib sloughed in and knocked him down and killed him. It's not something you could ever foresee or plan for. More lagging in the rib probably would've saved his life. But that's not what coal mine operators do. They're in the business of getting the coal out, not taking the wood in.

I worked as a laborer underground. I took a course and got an apprenticeship to be a mine electrician. I was a mine electrician, they gave me an apprenticeship. I took my apprenticeship at NAIT. In 1980 in February I was in the city taking the 4th year of my apprenticeship, and the 6 o'clock news came on after school one day. Four guys of my crew were on the news, dead. The roof caved in and killed them. . . .

It really impacts you. . .

That was 20 years ago, actually 25 years ago. I've never forgot that. . . .

Thinking back on it, there was times when, as a mine electrician there isn't a lot to do when they're mining, so you sit around a lot. I was sitting around one day, and I got up to go up to where they were mining just to see how things were going, stretch your legs. When I came back about an hour later, there was a piece of cap rock that had fallen from the roof, about the size of the seat of a chair and maybe 3 inches thick. Dropping on somebody in the dark, it would've snapped my neck. Other close calls. Guys rode the belt out. You weren't allowed to, but you could mine more coal and stay in the section later if you rode the belt out. So guys did that.

It's a conveyor belt that's suspended from the roof by chain. You just climb up on it and hop on. There's a technique to getting off without killing yourself, but you learn that pretty quick. If you're caught you're in trouble, but they basically turned a blind eye to it. The longer you stayed in the mine, the more coal they got out.

It is a danger that you have some control over. A lot of the danger at work you had no control over. Sometimes experienced miners, they can tell when the pillar is going to cave. It's quite an awesome experience to witness that first hand. The concussion will blow your hat right off and knock you down, and you can't see for half an hour because it's so dusty. And loud. But there's signs, and guys know. You could walk up to the mine and ask the guys, when's that pillar going to cave, and they'd say come back in 20 minutes. You come back in 20 minutes, and within a minute or 2 it caves. It's like they know. But there's always the unforeseen fault in the rock or something.

Q. So safety wasn't high on the mining companies' agenda?

I don't think so at the time. I think what that caused me to do was be a little bit disheartened with the management of the mine, because they really didn't put a whole lot of effort into health and safety. In some cases, underground coal mining is like a macho job. If you whine about health and safety issues, it just makes your working life a little more difficult, possibly. But guys die because other people don't stand up and say, hey that's wrong. I decided to stand up. So I became a shit disturber and a troublemaker. That ultimately ended up costing me my job at the mine. I moved to Hinton and got on with the pulp mill, and got a job with health and safety. Then it all kinda started to make sense. I had my electrical ticket. They didn't hire me as an electrician, they hired me as a

laborer. But within about 6 months I was working as an electrician. They needed an electrician to sit on their joint lockout committee. That was initially what they asked me to do.

A lock-out is when company and union people sit down and work out safe lockout procedures. Because some of our systems are pretty complicated to shut down and lock out. So I've been on that committee for pretty much the whole time I've been here, about 17 years. And I've been on the joint safety committee in various capacities for 15 years.

I was at the time the only health and safety rep that they could get a hold of. They had some very short notice to be in to the Labour Relations Board.

Q. There has been a long history of fighting to rid the plant here in Hinton of asbestos. How do you recall that struggle?

I guess to recap it from my perspective, we had one of our members who used to work as an asbestos abatement person. So he had first hand knowledge of what it looked like, where it was found, and how to properly safely remove it from site. He wasn't working here as an asbestos abater, he was working in the wood room. He basically taught us everything we know about asbestos. We had a management person in charge of doing the abatement work on site, absolutely blowing smoke up our ass about asbestos being gone. We had documentation, we had brought the issue at our joint safety committee, and were basically getting nowhere with the company. We knew it was there, they didn't want to do anything about it. So our guys put their foot down and said they're going to do a safe work refusal, and refuse to operate the plant until a decision was made about how they were going to get rid of it. They did an orderly shutdown of the power recovery department, shut down the turbines and the boilers. Then we got the call to go in and talk to the labor relations board.

I had been out rather late. I'd only had a couple hours sleep when I got a phone call that I had to go into the city for this. Of course the potential was there. I knew our guys, and our guys weren't just going to cave in and go back to work because some suit in the government said so. There was going to have to be some concrete movement in order for

the plant to start up again. I wasn't so sure that was going to happen. So I took my toothbrush with me on the trip.

It meant I was ready to go to jail.

Q. What did you think was going to happen?

As a union rep, although not an elected union rep, I didn't really know, I don't know what would've happened. I don't now if I would've been one of the ones to go to jail, but I certainly would've lent my toothbrush to somebody who was going, if they would take it. But we were prepared for that. You don't shut down your employer's business on a fancy or a whim. It was a serious issue. I think because our guys took that stand, most of them will live a little longer because of that. We've taken a lot of asbestos out of that mill.

Q. You had to go to Edmonton then to the LRB?

I think we left really early in the morning, because we had to be there by 7:30 or 8 in the morning. So we left at like 3 or 4. Talked to the lawyer on the cell phone all the way in. We got to the Labour Relations Board. Because we were so knowledgeable about asbestos, and because we had documentation that contradicted the actual facts of how much asbestos was at the mill, I don't think there was any will with the government agencies whether it would be Occupational Health and Safety or the Labour Relations Board. I don't think they wanted to push the issue. There was a general feeling there that they wanted to make a deal. We actually sat in the labor relations tribunal room, or whatever it is, very briefly and then we were in side rooms and there was shuttle diplomacy. People coming back and forth trying to work something out. Our guys wouldn't have gone back to work if they hadn't have come up with some kind of arrangement that was satisfactory.

Q. Do you see that as an important victory for the plant workers?

I think so, yes. It tells people that if you're right, stick to your guns, and take whatever flack you gotta take. I guess you get in a situation where both sides can claim a victory, but I don't really care. The bottom line is we got the asbestos removed out of that mill.

And they're still removing it to this day. A little slower than they were 10 years ago, but they're still taking it out today.

Q. Unfortunately, asbestos was everywhere those days wasn't it?

Yes. They had to remove some of the asbestos from the recreation center. One interesting story is we were at an AFL fall school at Jasper Park Lodge a few years ago. The porch cover over the main door was all asbestos transite, and it was in poor condition. We brought it to their attention, and they brought the abatement contractor that we were using at the mill out to the JPL and they abated it properly. They probably didn't even know it was asbestos, but we did.

Q. You have met a lot of union people over the years., Who stands out in your mind?

Just that there's been some people who have influenced me. One of them is brother George Rozon. He's a very knowledgeable man. He's made a difference in my life. Three of us from this local went to a convention or conference in Calgary, 1992 I think, to draft a health and safety activist handbook. He was one of the people. Winston Gereluk was there, and there was a bunch of people. But George stood out in my mind. Very energetic, very knowledgeable, very well spoken. The 3 of us from this local that went to that conference, one of them was Glen Taylor -- one of them who was on our safety committee, and a VP of operations and is now currently mayor of Hinton, and still a member of local 855. One of the other ones that went was Rod Schwetz, who is now our health and safety executive member at this local, and myself. That and maybe some other things that came along certainly impacted our lives and made a difference in this local. I believe what we've done here has saved lives. You can trace that back to people like George Rozon.

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