

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: David Mercer

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

David Mercer. Started at Swifts in 1969 and left in 1974 after a short strike in '74, so it would be the fall of 1974. At that time, in '69, it was a desired place to work in terms of monetary compensation. The wage rate was excellent. So coming out of high school, I graduated early out of high school at 17, and wanted to make a decent wage rate. The theme or the thought at that time amongst people in my group is if you go to work at a packing house the wage rates are high and financially it's a rewarding experience. So I applied because I was looking for money. What I got in return is much more than money. Born and raised in Edmonton, south side. Close to the old Gainers plant actually, although I worked at Swifts on the north side. I never worked at the old Gainers plant on the south side.

Oh indeed that's true. In the neighbourhood that I grew up, that area is called Ritchie, close to the old Gainers plant, there was certainly a community of not only the parents who worked in the plant, but of their children. They all knew, well my mom or my dad worked in a packing plant. So from the area I grew up, I was familiar with packing plants because of the old Gainers plant. I don't recall if I applied at the Gainers plant on the south side. I know I applied certainly at Swifts where I ended up getting employment. And at other packing plants on the north side. Cuz there was quite a number of them at that time on the north side.

There was indeed. They seemed to follow in that footsteps at that time. In my view at least, it began in the '60s and '70s because of the compensation. It was an attractive job in terms of money to have. That's since changed of course, it's change dramatically. But at least back from my start in the packing house in '69 and certainly what I've seen in the

'70s, that would have continued to be true, that the compensation was a major motivation I think.

Began the first department I was assigned to was the Beef Coolers. At 17, I think I lied about my age actually, at 17 I was a real skinny kid. There was some hesitation on behalf of the employment officer as to whether I could throw beef or not, if I was heavy enough to throw beef. I was successful in getting the position in Beef Coolers. The job of throwing beef, I didn't know what that meant. But it didn't take long for me to find out what throwing beef was. I understand that, for example, you've already interviewed a gentleman by the name of George Kozak. George was one of the first people that I met on the first day when I was assigned into the Beef Coolers. To say that the job was a heavy job would be an understatement. But what fascinated me even on the first day was the characters that were working in that department, which I later came to find out as I shifted from department to department, was true throughout the plant. There were characters there. There was, in my view, there was a huge educational component for me just by interaction with those people. What it presented to me, although I may not have realized it at that time when I was 17 starting at the Beef Coolers, is that you had individuals that were sincere, very strong unionists, and very hard workers. They were raising families, trying to pay for mortgages, and save for the kids to go on to university. I think in their minds they didn't want their kids working at a packing plant. So all of that was educational for me to come into a situation like that. I started my first day in the Beef Coolers. At that time the plant always went through a winter layoff. I started in the summer of '69 and was laid off towards December of 1969, which was normal. So my experience in the Beef Coolers was tough work.

You're throwing a side of beef from rail to rail. At that time the most junior member of the work force would be the one who would have to grasp the side of beef from the bottom while the more senior member had a pole that went into the hook on top of the rail. You'd attempt to perform this exercise together, where you shift it from one rail to another rail. A side of beef weighs a few pounds, dressed out. It's far in excess of my body weight. Some humorous aspects of that, especially involving Mr. Kazak. I can recall a Mr. Rystat and certainly other members of the Beef Cooler unit, felt that the best way to initiate a new worker would be to have him do all the lifting. There was certainly

a number of sides of beef that got dropped by yours truly. But that improved over time. That was just sort of an initiation that you came to expect. Not a harmful thing. But in a way it was a form of bonding. I didn't see it at the time, but I recognize that now. It's a form of bonding. If these young people and new rookies in the department can cut this and continue to work here, then you're going to be accepted. So I went through that. But the depth of those people is something that's always stayed with me. There's some humorous experiences there in the atmosphere. You have to remember working at packing plant departments is very divergent in terms of temperature, surroundings, moisture content, all of those things. The Beef Coolers was a cold and damp place to work. It had to be that for health conditions. So it was a very diverse climate. In some ways the jobs were very boring. As is normal amongst the workers you'd try and find other things to take away the boredom other than just doing the job. That would be one of the stories in which I quickly got an education on how to properly throw a beef from rail to rail. I got that education by carrying the beef myself from rail to rail, and not successfully on all of them. But eventually the senior people, after you had your initiation, would step in. Certainly there was fatherly figures in that department who would say, enough's enough. As I've already mentioned, I can think of Mr. Kazak as being one. Then we'd get on with the job at hand and be accepted.

After the winter layoff, I'm guessing, but it's probably fairly accurate, it's probably for a month or two, we turned on a recall back to the plant. Not to the same department. I was recalled back to the Kill Floor, again a totally different atmosphere. Assigned to the Kill Floor. I can remember my first job was catching blood in a pot. I was only assigned there for a few days and then assigned to a department, Table Ready Meats, which was your finished product, table ready meats. Again, now in Table Ready Meats, the apparent different right away from other areas of the plant would be there was women that worked in Table Ready Meats, which really appealed to me. I thought this is great, I think I like this department much better. Again, diverse in terms of conditions. I went from the Kill Floor, it's a very hot, humid atmosphere to Table Ready Meats, which is a cool, cold atmosphere. Then finally, after a short stint of a few months in Table Ready Meats, was assigned to the Pickle Cellar. That name always fascinated me. When the supervisor came to me and said, Dave you're going to be assigned to the Pickle Cellar, I'd never been

down to the Pickle Cellar. The vision of what that would be wasn't even close to the way it was. So the majority of my time there after, all of my time there after, was spent in the Pickle Cellar, which is the basement floor of the Swifts plant. I had a vision of pickles, etc. Well it was just nicknamed that because the salt and brine mixture was made in the Pickle Cellar, but there were a whole bunch of other activities that were carried on. That's the department that I ended up spending out of my six years, probably 4-1/2 years to the end of 1974 when I left. And again was exposed in the Pickle Cellar, not to know the people, there was probably 120 people that worked in the Pickle Cellar. The same encounter that I'd had in my first department, the Beef Cooler, was, although different people, showed me that there was characters in that plant. There was the same type of work ethic amongst those employees that impressed me. And there was a lot of camaraderie amongst those employees. And a lot of strong unionists that came out of that department as well.

Yes it was. It was, in terms of an encounter with the union, our educational system through elementary, junior high and high school doesn't concentrate on unionization. I don't even believe it's a part of the curriculum. Unionization, if you watch TV, even back then in the '60s, was a bad word. So I didn't realize that the Swifts plant, when I applied there I didn't realize it was unionized. I should have because of the wage rate, the compensation that I mentioned earlier is what attracted me to that job. I should have realized that because it was the union of course, which was the collection of those employees, who achieve those types of wages rates through a long history and a long struggle at Swifts. Which was related to me by the senior individuals at coffee time. I found those stories fascinating. About how the union began at Swifts. At coffee time in the cafeteria I would seek out those people that would tell me those kinds of stories because it fascinated me. It was my first encounter with the unionized environment, my only encounter. My other jobs previous to that were part time jobs in high school. But all of a sudden, a whole new area opened the door to me from the advice, direction and stories I was receiving from these senior employees whose back, they walked bent over because their backs were sore. Their hands were gnarled, their hands were cut. And they began to tell me, maybe I thought there was some hope for me other than being a skinny kid. They began to tell me the stories as to how I got the wage rate that attracted me

there, what it was that led to the giving of that wage rate. And those were fascinating stories. Things like, as far as discipline and discharge in years gone by, you didn't worry about that. Because the employee would just be fired and not brought back the next day. As far as being injured, if you were injured on the job, that was not a problem for the employer because you just wouldn't be back. They'd just lay you off with your injury, and it was not a problem. Opened a whole door to such a degree that I became actively involved in the union at the Swifts plant, with UFCW Local 280.

I began in the Assistant Shop Steward role and then progressed from Assistant Shop Steward to a department shop steward, then progressed, if it is progression. I always enjoyed the shop steward role the most in my union background, because of the interaction on a department and plant floor level. Then went to 3rd Vice President, 2nd Vice President and 1st Vice President. That would have taken me to some closure in my hands-on career at Swifts in '74. I became very active in the union movement there, which was motivated by the individuals that I worked with. Especially the background they gave me on the struggle to unionize.

This is what fascinated me the most, and I guess I've never told anyone this part. I'd read the book, *The Jungle*, which of course is an American author, about the packing industry in Chicago. I'd read that book somewhere after starting at Swifts. What amazed me is what I observed in a packing house and what I was told by my fellow workers there. In my view, not much had changed since the 1920s or '30s when *The Jungle* was written. Not much had changed in the packing house industry from 1907 until late 1960s and '70s. So the stories coincided with that. It was very difficult to unionize that plant, is what I was told. Certainly some of the veterans you're going to interview would reaffirm that. So there's no specific story that jumps out, but other than it had a huge impression on a young guy 17 years of age, never exposed to that in the school curriculum in Alberta. But this was real life, this was real stuff. This was human stuff. So as far as any special anecdotes on that, I can't offer you any other than to say I was very impressed and influenced by that.

The plant, the vast majority of my fellow workers, it was like a United Nations, but it was a European Caucasian United Nations. The majority of my fellow workers were first generation immigrants from European countries. I was presented with all types of

nationalities who brought to work with them their homeland experiences that would lead to some division. What amazed me with all these people, the divisions that they may have with respect to their particular cultural background, when there would be an inequity, when there would be something that would be discriminatory against one of them, they would pull together as a group. That wasn't necessarily true on all issues, but when it came to unequal treatment in which you needed the workers to unite, my experience from that plant I could not think and have not seen since the way that those groups would pull together to rectify any discrimination or inequity that would occur. I can think of some major issues which occurred prior to the strike 1974 that we were trying to resolve as a union with the employer. A lot of those dealt with equal treatment for women in the plant. Equal treatment proposals that we had to try and level out the playing field, to remove those types of things that we thought as a union executive were discriminatory and that we couldn't tolerate.

Well UFCW, which is now the predecessor of course, but the previous Canadian Food and Allied Workers, was one of the forerunners in the concept that has now become "equal pay for equal work." They were one of the forerunners in that area. Back to the old United Packing House Workers to the Canadian Food and Allied Workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers forerunners in equal pay for equal work. We've seen a huge diversification in the type of treatment from department to department. Which was personalized, depending on who the supervisor was. We felt that there was some instances in which we wanted to establish a progressive discipline model to be uniformly applied throughout the plant. While more senior union executive members were away at negotiations, and this specifically relates to 1974, I recall receiving a call from the union president at that time, who was Mr. Gerry Beauchamp, and the Chief Steward, Peter Boitson. They're away at the negotiating table trying to negotiate a collective agreement. It put a little bit of pressure on the employer, they wished the entire plant to slow down. To go back to what I've said, I've never seen a group of workers who could come together for a common goal and be so adamant in their belief that they wanted to achieve that. I could walk into a department in front of the supervisors and in front of management, and with just a signal that entire department would wind down and slow down, just with a hand signal. Everyone knew, at least in the members, what we were trying to achieve.

Management was amazed at that. I suppose today some of them would be disciplined and fired right away. But at that time, the concept was to unique that we were going to wind down this entire operation. So much so that it resulted in the negotiator for the employer, who was negotiating with the union executive, phoning back to the plant with the union executive member saying, you've proved to us that these people will wind down this operation in order to achieve the equality they want to achieve. Now you've got to prove to us that you can wind it back up. And the same thing happened. The membership was so determined to resolve those issues, that work would resume. That is very scary, in my view, for an employer. Because when you see members of the union are that determined and that united, that's a scary concept. So they were taught a lesson, that these members were certainly determined and certainly wanted to achieve a result at the bargaining table. They were. Wage increase of course. Different employer in '74. Swifts pattern is they did not believe in scabbing a plant. So we did not face that issue, and we knew that. They were other things, but they just weren't that type of employer. So we weren't concerned that there would be an attempt to bring in scabs, or replacement workers, as they're politely called. The issues that got resolved in the '74 strike were the introduction of some key components in language changes, in addition to the monetary package. But the language changes were all changes directed at equality, progressive discipline and fairness in the workplace. I can't give you specific examples, but that was the motivation and that was the agenda of the negotiating team based on the wishes of the membership. We achieved that after a very short strike, which I think in my recollections, lasted one or 2 weeks at the most, and was resolved with the employer coming to recognize that in Edmonton it's a force to be reckoned with, with respect to these workers.

There was mutual respect, I would agree with that. The approach by Swifts was distinctly different with respect to their labour management relations than what was seen at the plant after Swifts sold. Swifts approach was mutual respect, which is the foundation in my view to any meaningful negotiations. You have to have respect for both sides. But Swifts were not fools. If you couldn't produce the strength, the unity of the union members, and show Swifts that you had the unity of members, I'm not so sure that we would have achieved the results we did. But we did it because Swifts was convinced that this group was unified and had a common purpose. That's what led to, if we could show

the force and the strength, to Swifts having the respect they did. So I say it was a by-product of the unity of those employees that led to Swifts taking the attitude that they did have respect, and they responded that way. In fairness to them, to negotiate with Swifts was in good faith. I don't know what would have happened if the membership had been weak, because we didn't see that. So I attributed it to a very strong membership, and that's what led to the result. Swifts was a decent employer to negotiate with in comparison to what followed after.

Local 280 and the senior union officers were unique in my view, both from my perspective then and my perspective now as a union labour lawyer. Did not scare Peter Boitson, who was a main union figure in the time period I was there, and a remarkable man. There can be a fear to educate a young guy that's coming through the ranks, cuz he's gonna take your job. That was not present, it just wasn't even a consideration. It was the opposite. The union executive at that time cultivated young people to get involved in the union movement. In some cases today we don't see that. We do see it in a lot of cases. But Local 280 was unique because of the people on the executive. They cultivated it, they wanted that. They had no fear with respect to their vested interest in educating any person that showed interest. I showed interest because of the stories and background I'd heard from senior packing house workers at coffee time. And the union executive, and especially Peter Boitson, cultivated that so much so that UFCW Local 280 is the reason that I'm a union lawyer today. And the background to that is that in 1973 UFCW Local 280 sent me to the Labour College of Canada in Montreal. Sponsored me, paid for me to go there, and made up my lost wages while I was away. Which really, in '73, is an incredible generous offer. Passed by the membership of Local 280. So in 1973 I attended the Labour College of Canada in Montreal, came back from that residential course back to the plant and resumed my union duties as a Vice President. In the same way that when I had started at Swifts the interest that had been generated in me and the whole opening of the door to the union movement, that emotional and incredible experience, the same thing was repeated after I went to the Labour College. A whole new door was opened up to me, and I think one that was anticipated by the union back here in Edmonton. So much so that I decided I was going to go to university and I was going to become a union labour lawyer. That's exactly what happened. And I went on, certainly after becoming a



lawyer and acted for Local 280 since 1980 to the present day. Amazing people, in that no fear of educating. In fact they felt it was a huge benefit. Any time anyone expressed any interest in education, would send union members off to any school available. The whole process of working at Swifts was an education, similar to the academic setting. They encouraged that, they weren't afraid. They were in my view just amazing people.

Education is certainly important for a number of reasons. For me, related to myself first, education as a unionist produced in me, just expanded my viewpoint. You can come out of our educational system in Alberta, I'm talking grades 1 to 12, very narrow in your focus. My fear is that it's very right wing narrow focus. So what education did for me from a union perspective is just broaden my world, broaden my horizons. Opened up my focus, it was no longer narrow. That's why education is important. The other aspect certainly is that, if we are going to truly make a change in the labour movement in Canada, education is where it's at. Because education gives you the ability to articulate positions, to advocate positions, and to be able to justify your positions. Without an educational component, you can have a lot of hands on experience. And don't mistake me, I value my working experience at Swifts with my fellow members and employees as much as all the degrees I have on the wall. In fact, in some cases, my working and union experience with Local 280 is valued higher than all my degrees I have on my wall. The academic part, though, balanced those interests and gave me the tools to advocate and articulate on behalf of the union movement. It's important for those reasons. It's only later in life that I discover that, in a comparison of unions for example, the union I belong to today is the strongest union I have ever seen, and that's called the Law Society of Alberta. It's a union, and is the strongest close shop union I've ever belonged to. My colleagues in the legal profession, for example, would be offended to be calling the Law Society a union. But that's exactly what it is. So education in adapting those kinds of concepts that I'm describing to you. Put them back into the workplace. Blue collar, white collar, it does not matter. Education is a tool, education is a method in which we can enhance the understanding and make changes. Focus is on change to better the conditions of those who make the profits, of those who produce the products to make the profits. That can white collar, blue collar. So key component, big big component.

Definitely, seen it not only on the shop floor, but seen it as a legal advisor to the union. Dramatic shift in something that we spoke about earlier. Here's the most important word: a complete and total lack of respect for these working men and women. Complete. In my view, degrading responses by that era and that era of management. Profit was the only motive in my view. To my dismay, I would wonder out loud and silently, why they would take that approach as employers. It's so destructive, it's so hard to repair, once you embark upon that course. Ultimately leading to the most dramatic strike in Alberta in 1986. There was good reason for that, which of course would take a long time to digest and go through. The most compelling reason, the most dramatic change in management, was lack of respect for these working women and men. Very apparent to me as their legal advisor. And something, quite frankly, I'll never get over. You don't leave behind and walk away. It could be because I came out of that plant. But I can't leave behind and walk away from those experiences I had as a legal advisor during those most difficult times. So dramatic change, you bet. Lack of respect, I say complete absence of respect. Did it have an impact on me? An impact that I will never leave behind and forget. Did it have an impact on people that I care a lot about, the men and women that worked at that plant? It had a dramatic and sad impact on those individuals.

I've seen in some aspects it was accelerated, to my dismay. Accelerated in terms of just absolutely no comprehension of what would make good labour relations by starting with respect to these people. Every move that was made, in my view, by management there, was meant to discredit them and treat them like the very animals that they worked on. That was the most offensive part for me, that these people weren't animals. That's the job they did, and they did very well and very efficiently. But complete disregard for them as people.

It was a dominant thing. The other part is, I'm sure if you were interviewing a management person, they would say this union is very obstructionist with respect to our plans to reorganize that work force. There was no end to the reorganizations. If the union had cooperated with respect to reorganization, which really means rollbacks, in which they did, showed an interest in trying to assist the employer because they said they needed to freeze wage rates. There was no end to it. The next time around there wasn't any reward for that type of concession given to the employer, because they wanted more.

The tendency, at least the view from the majority of employees in that plant, is that we were used, and used badly. That's why you've seen such a dramatic reaction, both in '86 and seen a dramatic reaction in the way they voted with their show of hands on subsequent issues that occurred in the post-Pocklington era. They've been used, and used dramatically.

Maybe in general terms, this would be. A statement I've said when I've addressed other labour unions about the example of the type of membership of Local 280. And this would apply during the Swifts days as well. When I said depth of character of these individuals, they weren't academically highly educated. But in my view, they were some of the smartest people I've ever met in my life. They were the most committed people I've ever met. I think it would be great if the majority of us had the kind of commitment those workers displayed, those men and women displayed. By their depth of character, what I mean by that is the work ethic they brought to the job. But combined with a recognition on behalf of those men and women that united, they have to be united in order to preserve the gains they had made in the past. If they didn't remain united towards that common goal, then they were doomed to be treated with disrespect. That continued. Without that, the plant would not have survived as long as it did.

In the day to day operation of a union at the floor level is the filing of grievances. The filing of grievances of pursuing those grievances through the various grievance steps. A number of issues that were solved without even going on to the ultimate arbitration step, which of course is very costly and involves lawyers like myself, were solved on a plant level. Again, an indicator of the commitment of the people that made up the union. Those types of grievances were solved through the grievance procedure because of that overshadowing of the strength of the membership. It could be such a simple issue. Such a simple issue as paying a woman a wage rate that is lower than a man. Which Local 280 strongly objected to and pursued. I recall grievances like that when I was an officer in the union from '69 to '74. Those issues would be resolved at the grievance level because management knew that this union had the determination not to let that inequality to continue. Any type of discriminatory conduct in which discipline for one employee would be light and discipline for another employee for a very similar event would be heavy, was again the union took a very strong view over that inconsistency. Again,

grievances like that were solved at the grievance level because the employer knew that the union was serious and they wouldn't tolerate that. Those types of things I can recall and I've seen and I've dealt with. Let's face it, your answer in labour relations is not lawyers. I am one, but that's not your answer in good labour relations. Lawyers are technical. Lawyers deal with words and tend to complicate the process. My ideal labour relations framework would be an employer who has respect for the employees and for the union, and the union has respect for the employer. It's not a sin to make money. A union wants the employer to be successful, wants the employer to make profit. Because their job security relies on that. Union members know that, unions know that. The concept of unionism has not been properly addressed in this country. We haven't properly educated with respect to unionism. My best example is the one that I gave you. The Law Society of Alberta is a very strong union, and nobody would think of it as a union. Credit unions, wheat pools, they all fit the definition. So we've lacked in the education area and, in my view, Local 280 led in the education area and UFCW is leading in the education area and should continue to do so.