

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Hazel Proctor

Interviewer: Jennifer Kelly and Donna Coombs-Montrose

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Index: Community activist Alberta Association Advancement of Coloured People (AAACP); Singer in band; Multiculturalism 1950s/early 1960s; Sleeping Car Porters work; Employment at Council of Christians and Jews; Hattie's Chicken Inn

Born in Edmonton, Alberta. Went to Queens Avenue school in Edmonton. Moved to Calgary when I was nine years old. So I guess up to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in Edmonton, and then continuing here in Calgary. And the rest of my schooling was done here in Calgary, Junior High and Senior, where I graduated.

*Interviewer: What did you do when you graduated?*

Oh when I graduated, believe it or not, I graduated in June I. August I married. I had big plans for everything, to do this and do that. One of these handsome young men swept me off my feet. Yes, I got married that year. That was in '50. Oh oh, I'm already dating myself.

No I stayed at home for awhile, yes. I shouldn't say that. I did work for the city as a stenographer and later during the pregnancy of my first child, I worked for a lawyer. So I kept pretty busy.

*Interviewer: Was it easy getting a job?*

Yes it was. I had the qualifications. I don't recall having any problems getting a job. I think so, yes.

I of course continued my singing, which I'd done with my father for years. I continued that. Then while working for the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, I became the private secretary to the Executive Director. I became involved very much in the community then, because this involved different religions, races and that coming together to learn about each other and understand each other. Especially during the Brotherhood Week. I believe that was held a week in February, I can't remember now.

Oh such things as suppers, banquets, shows, put on by the different communities. The public of course was invited to attend. Our group, AAACP, the Alberta Association for Advancement of Colored People, we also did our bit.

Well at one time, I believe I was the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> president. Someone else will have to verify that. We held a banquet and dance at the then Beacon Hotel. We had music by my father's band and a floor show, and the first AAACP contest, and a special guest speaker. I believe that year it was Mr. Grant MacEwan, who was then mayor of Calgary.

*Interviewer: Was he active in the community?*

Yes, very much so. I believe he had a membership in the Council of Christians and Jews as either a patron or whatever. Whenever we needed him to speak, or seek his advice, he was always there to readily help us out.

He was the Mayor at the time. Prior to that I believe he was on City Council. Oh yes, very much so. No, not the meetings. Because our meetings weren't that exciting. At our meetings we'd try to do this and try to do that. But sometimes at the meetings we didn't

have too many people attending. We were trying to get everyone involved. Couldn't get enough of our younger people to join. At the time, they didn't see a reason for a AAACP. I think initially it was to be together when there were problems facing, well discrimination problems. I think you'll hear more of that from our grievance chairman when you talk to him. He took care of a lot of that. There were some prejudices and discrimination practices then. Some of us came in contact with it more than others. So we thought, okay we've got to get together like the counterpart in the States, NAACP. So we wanted to have something here that would get our people together in case it was needed.

*Interviewer: Were there issues about education?*

I don't think education. If anything, perhaps housing...or renting.... Alright, a couple of instances: They would go to rent this apartment or this house, and all of a sudden, I'm sorry, we've just rented. Although they had phoned ahead. Not too many of us drove cars. But would phone ahead and find out if there was space available. Then once they got there, low and behold somehow it was rented. Then the party would go back, make the phone call again as someone else. Yes, we have a room for rent. So those kind of situations. Then if you wanted to move into a home, into a nice neighborhood, you may run into some problems. People didn't want you to move there. Oh I can't really tell you too much about that, because I didn't...there would be problems where people didn't want you there, but it wasn't overt like we hear in the States where people came and threw rocks at you. But they let you know. Or else the person selling the home sometimes was told by the community; no don't sell that and so on. Some did say, well we're going to anyhow. I wish I could think of the people who did do that. Sooner or later it was alright..

*Interviewer: Did the community get together over these issues*

That's what they should've done, but at that time the AAACP was not formed. I think as Mojo will tell you later on, the biggest thing that AAACP was helping was discrimination. For instance, in a swimming pool here in Calgary, also in some of the places where they went to dance, dance halls. Those were some of the areas that came to our attention after we were formed.

It was a public swimming pool, but not for us. As I said, Mojo did attend and find out more about that, which he can tell you.

*Interviewer: Were there any public signs in windows etc*

I think we sort of knew. There weren't any signs, oh no. But it was expressed to you once you got there, I understand. The dance halls. Then of course no, you can't come in. Why? Then there'd be an argument. Then the parties involved would contact the AAACP.

Sometimes we wondered, okay these young people are having these problems, why are they only contacting us when there's a problem? They wouldn't join, to make us stronger. But we couldn't say, oh no we're not going to help you out because you're not a member. But we tried to do it that way.

And I guess a couple of families had some problems at school too. Children calling their children names. Racial slurs and perhaps a little scuffle would break out, because a black child isn't going to take that. Then the principal would somehow find out that, to their estimation, it was the black child who was at fault. So things like that. I recall in Edmonton, being involved with AAACP, the teacher was reading this story about *Black Sambo*. I didn't like it. To this day, I can't stand the thought of that book. But anyway, I got up and walked out of class. The teacher didn't like that. I went home to my mama and told her about it. She came back to the school with me. The Principal saw her coming,

and ran. Oh yes. So that book was not read again, at least while I was in class. But my mother was the AAACP. But she didn't want to take anything. No don't you be hitting my child for this and that. So it was good to know you had that family support.

*Interviewer: Were dances a problem?*

The only instances I knew of were the black men. Yes. But at the time, I don't think women went alone. It wasn't as today at the dance halls where everyone goes alone or something. But the men would be going, and perhaps they had a white companion. Oh oh. I guess not too good, no. Again, Mojo could tell you cuz he would've had the files on these. Then again, within my own immediate first husband's family, there were inter-racial marriages. But at the time there were some problems. Yes. Or else if they went in alone they might start fights or might take someone else's woman.

No, we were just starting. We wanted to get on our feet first.

Yes, as president. I believe later on I may have been secretary. Oh to run the meetings, to be the head, just as a President would. Try to keep the meetings running smoothly, and be with the committees that wanted to do something like this.

Yes, intermediary. Oh let's see. We did participate in big shows at the auditorium when they had different groups performing. We had a gospel group performing on stage. Then there'd be another group, maybe Chinese or another religious group. So we were part of the big picture that way too: Canadian Council of Christians and Jews. Also the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews would ask for delegates from different communities to come to their Banff seminar. I did go to one or two and we tried to get others from my community to go too.

Just a seminar get-together where each group would tell of their problems, then there'd be talks of how we could understand each other, what we could do to face these or understand this person who we didn't know before, and found about their problems too, which weren't too much different from ours. But we could understand this person and appreciate. Yes, but not dwelling on them to say go march against it, but just understanding and promoting brotherhood.

The Canadian Indian. They would put on suppers at one of the reservations. Had their meals, their Indian food. I recall Bannock. Then they'd put on their dances, which was exciting, and talk. One of the Indian gentlemen, he was from the Winnipeg area I believe, William Wutane. He was a lawyer and working out of Calgary. He would be guest speaker at different affairs too. He was sort of a spokesman on behalf of the Indian people, as well as a spokesman for brotherhood week period.

We thought our social events were very important. Because at that time we were beginning to move out of the core of the city. Who's your daughter? I saw your daughter and didn't recognize her. So we would try to create something at the socials that we wouldn't lose touch with each other as a community. Yes, down east Calgary, around 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 4<sup>th</sup> St. east. They also had a club, the Utopia Club at the time, before the AAACP was formed, where we held dances and birthday parties. Whole families would come. So this was a social event where we got to know each other. So that was good. I recall meeting the President of the porter's union. Randolph I believe was his name... Because my father was a porter. In fact, that was the first time I sang to someone other than with my dad. My dad said ok this man is here from the States, we're going to do this song. So dad played for me and I sang this song for Mr. [Philip] Randolph.

Yes. So that was quite something that he came to our city and met with us. It wasn't AAACP at the time, but he met with the community, and all the porters were there. Yes. That's when we moved from Edmonton. My father was able to get on as a porter. I think there was five of us kids at the time, and we moved here to Calgary. He became a porter. Good living. Much better living than what he was doing before. Well I recall now he did work in the coal mines. What else did my father do? He was singing on the radio. Of course he couldn't make money there. But I just recall knowing about the coal mines. Then there was the depression when we were in Edmonton.

*Interviewer: What was his job as a porter?*

Ok, sleeping car porter, he would put up and take down the beds and service the customers on the sleeping cars. Then also during the war he would be there to transport the soldiers from this end to down east where they got on the boats to go to the wars. And he took his guitar along and played and had singsongs. Also there was a bit of card games going on also. So it was a tough job for him, which I learned later on. Any time he would lay over in Calgary, my mother and I would walk up to the train station and help him do his berths. Help him take them down, make the beds and so on. That would sometimes be the only time we'd see him. I guess he would give mom his check, which I found out later. That's what when it comes to being the oldest, I'd go with mom so I was part of my dad and what he was doing. So I knew what it was to make down a berth and so on. I don't know about the others, that was what my mom and I did. Because he wouldn't be able to leave the station if he was going straight through. He wouldn't be able to leave and come to the house.

*Interviewer: What was his route on the trains?*

Calgary, Winnipeg, Montreal or something. Ya I think it was. But I didn't know till later on that it was kind of hard for her.... And with 5 kids, and later on there was 7 of us.

Later on some of them were involved in the AAACP, but I don't know from there because I was quite young and can't recall. If so, I was too young, I didn't know about that. I was going to school and this sort of thing.

I think so. Yes, the railway was very close there. Then there was a couple of restaurants, the *Chicken Inns*, were also located on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue where the station was across the street from it. Another was down on 5<sup>th</sup> St also. These were places where, when the porters came in town, they knew where to go to eat or socialize or get to see each other.

Yes, both of them were. Yes, they would know that. Yes they would. But I wasn't allowed to go, of course, except to my aunt Hattie's, which was on 5<sup>th</sup> St. I could go there sometimes and maybe help Aunt Hattie. But once it got later, I was to be back home. I was too young. Dad and mom were very protective. That wasn't a place for a young girl to be at. All these men, and there'd be liquor there. Yes, which I didn't realize at the time, but my mom and dad knew.

It was a good community. Everyone knew each other. Even the children were looked after. We'd go to one of the movie houses. If we'd get out at dusk time we'd walk home, hello there little Miss Proctor, how are you? So we were looked after. Ladies of the evening, they would make sure they got home. You could tell everyone was looking out for us. I think so, at least that's the way I felt.

They probably were by the time we arrived. I don't know. Ok, my grandmother came from Oklahoma and settled in Amber Valley. I believe 3 children were born. My mom, her sister Hattie, and I believe there was a brother. Then from there my Aunt Hattie was



married first and went to Edmonton. I don't know whether she got married or got a job first, but soon after she went back and picked up my mom and took her to Edmonton. Ya they came over in covered wagons, apparently my grandmother did. I don't know how fortunate I am. Then building a little cabin or something. Cuz my mom I believe was born in one of those cabins, and she just did not like it at all. She didn't have good memories of that at all. The best ...memory was when her sister picked her up and took her out of there.

Apparently so. I know of some from Maidstone. Now my dad had come from Belfontain, Ohio. He became a naturalized Canadian. I'm sure glad he came, met my mom.

You kinda lost touch. Well they were busy. Well let's face it too, a lot of the women were the ones who were the bread makers. I know of a friend who worked where you pick chickens, something like that. A lot of women cleaned houses. So they were the strong people of different households. Supplement, yes. That's a good question. Somehow they were making a better income and were able to move. Whether it was one income or two incomes, they were finally able to get a little better than a storefront place. Yes I would say maybe late '40s into the '50s. Cuz by the time I was in high school, people had moved away and got better accommodations and so on. That's possible. I don't remember. I was too busy in high school, enjoying that aspect of my life, which was great. Western Canada High School. I just loved it. I was a cheerleader. I was in the students' union. You name it, I was involved. I just liked being involved. So those were some of the best years of my life, at Western Canada High School. In fact they're having a 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary 2003, and I'm on the Alumni Board of directors.

*Interviewer: Were there many African Canadian students at school?*

Not many. Maybe you could count on one hand. Some went to Crescent Heights. If you recall, Violet King, the first black lawyer, she went to Crescent Heights High School.

That's the only one I can remember went to the other schools. Mostly the girls sorta stuck in there and graduated. The boys were there, played a bit of sports, but very few did stay on to graduate. I don't know why. Yes, I would say at that time you needed your [high school] diploma.

There was a vice president; there was a secretary and a treasurer, and the grievance chairman. Those were the main ones. Mojo Williams. Can't remember if that was Ted King or Ted King was perhaps the president before me. There was Winnie Turner, Rachael Walton. They were right there giving their all and doing their best. A lot of the Mayes family. I believe so. Not at that time, no. Yes. That went good, that went good. I enjoyed my tenure as president. But unfortunately, I don't know if I should say it, but sometimes we are our worst enemies. And I say we, of our community. If it's appeared that maybe you're getting too much out of this, just like back in slavery time, the light skinned woman or someone went up to the house. So they didn't like the idea she was treated better if she got a good position in the house while they were still out doing the fields. Well I'm just thinking that maybe that is still part of our makeup. Sometimes we can't appreciate that someone has done well for themselves and are doing [well].

When we'd hold these affairs, the dances and whatnot, we'd try to encourage people to join. So that was the membership drive. Or we'd phone some of our families that weren't involved, please come on out and join. Yes. I can't recall what it was. Unfortunately, there weren't that many members to make it financially. When we put on the dances, the cost of the tickets would supply. And of course the music was by my father's band, Bert

Proctor. So therefore, didn't have to pay the band at that time. Cuz he was a member and so were the others in the band. Well not exactly more for the ticket, but we didn't have to pay for a band out of that price. Oh yes, yes he was. He played the blues. I even recall he played some western music too. He'd have his records playing with him and singing with him or playing. I just loved to hear him play the guitar. I recall years ago when I was just tiny I'd be at his knee listening to him play and teach my cousins, Eleanor Collins in Vancouver and Pearl. Pearl is gone now. And teaching them harmony. That is where I started my love of music, from my dad. He became involved in different bands and had his own bands. I recall him being on the radio singing Hawaiian music. He was singing Hawaiian lyrics, at least what I thought it sounded like. I'd go to school and tell the kids, I'm Hawaiian, my dad's a Hawaiian. Just like when Joe Lewis was the champ, I'd tell the kids, Joe Lewis is my uncle. Sort of gave you a feeling of pride, someone to, oh excuse me. Cuz my dad did play with other bands. I'm trying to think who that was that he played with sometimes. A couple of places downtown.

Oh yes, just there was too much dissention. A bit of dissention, ya.

Oh yes. I continued to be as far as I could. Oh I helped, cuz I was still with Canadian Council of Christians and Jews. So I helped plan other affairs, and so on. I wanted to keep my AAACP connected to the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews. So that's why I continued on being a member.

Canadian Council of Christians and Jews? Well the chairman, I believe his name was Jones in Toronto. And in Calgary the executive director was Felix Muller. He was my boss. ... I can't recall if he quit or what. But there was a new boss came in. We didn't see eye to eye. I knew too much about running the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews,

and he just didn't like the idea that I knew that much. So we had conflict of personalities. Went to [work at] CP Rail. Got on as stenographer at the Odgen shops here in Calgary, and from there worked myself up to the private secretary, and then up to the office manager, assistant office manager. Yes, an early retirement. Pensioned off. Oh no, I don't even think there is an AAACP now. Oh I think there's need for it, but it's just the dissention of people trying to get along together. And youngsters not thinking that they needed something like this. They had other lives to lead, and so on. I guess, I don't know. Oh if anything, just the socializing. But yes, sooner or later there's going to be a need. But not the way the community is now. Because I don't think we could all come together and think collectively. Everyone has their own lives and belong maybe to different organizations. I belong to some different ones. I belong to a women's group called the Beta Sigma Phi International Women's Organization. That's a women's group life learning friendship. It's a sisterhood. It's cultural, do some service projects. Something like the International Association for Women. But it's a women's organization. You don't join, it's through a college. It was started years ago because during the war women couldn't go to university. They had to stay at home. It was started in the States, in Kansas City. So it was started as a book reading club. You're invited to join. At that time I think the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews was the only one.

I recall going to the churches for the Christmas pageants and this sort of thing. But for me, the church wasn't. The only one church I knew, it was just that church and their members. As I said, the only thing I recall is in putting on the Xmas pageant for children. Not to my knowledge. When was this, did you say? I think it was getting better. Because

we did have a bus driver, Didwy Knotwoods. Other jobs I guess. But I don't know if it was because of the AAACP. It was just because of the individual.

Alright, thank you. Very good, thank you very much.

Grant MacEwan. In fact he was honored at the first Black Achievement Awards, which was held in Calgary. He was one of the recipients of a special award, because he's always been a supporter of the black community.