

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Bill Sommerfeld

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

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Location: Hinton, AB

I was born in Saskatchewan on a farm. Our farming district was called Wandsworth. It was close to the old Fort Carleton site, which is now a historical site, in the old Riel rebellion era. We lived not too far from Batoche, where Riel made his last stand. That's where I was born, and I lived on the farm until I was 10 years old. In 1947 my dad sold the farm and animals and horses, and moved to Alberta. I lived in Barrhead from age 10 to 15, when I went out working. I was working at age 15. My first job was section crew on a railroad. At that time there was about 5 of us working there with one supervisor. We all got fired. We were riding what we used to call the jigger. We seen a gopher in the ditch and we stopped to get the gopher, and just left the jigger on the track. The damn freight train come around the corner, and I can still see that jigger fly. All of us got fired. I thought, I shouldn't have got fired, because I had no control over the driving and parking of that jigger. But I went up the road anyway.

Oh this was close to Edmonton, Ardrossan. My folks lived in Barrhead. At that time we lived in a shack on the railroad track. You remember how the section crews had their little bunkhouses there, kitchens. That's how we lived.

In my bunkhouse there was 4 of us. It as about an 8x10 shack. You could throw a cat out just about any place. We had a wood stove and we burned coal, which was available through the railroad. We had a wood cook stove, that was it. It did the heating and the cooking. In the morning we'd leave for work, and we shared our grocery expense. We'd put a roast in the oven, and sometime during the day somebody would get back and throw in some onions and potatoes and carrots, and that was our supper. It was easy to cook, and that's mostly how we ate. It was not a bad meal, but after a while you kind of get tired of roast beef or roast pork and potatoes. But we lived alright. I didn't stay there long, got fired. So I was looking for a new job.

Just maintaining was our job. Tamping ties and keeping the track level was our main job.

There was a lot of people doing that. We had a certain section, I forget what it was, I would say about 20 miles. But an old railroader will probably correct me on that, because I never stayed on the railroad long enough to really know all the railroad tricks and whatnot. Then I had to look for a job again. Then it was November and I went over to Gainers packing plant. They were hiring extra help for the Christmas rush. They hired me and I worked there. They said I'd get laid off as soon as the Christmas rush was over. That was true, I got laid off the end of January. But in the meantime I worked loading cars, hanging beef. We worked on hanging beef in railroad cars. That was a hard job. You'd put a whole yearling beef on your shoulder and walk it about 100 feet, and then hang it. Mind you, we had fellows helping us hang it, we called them hookers. They had

a long pole with a spike in it to hook the beef on the hanging hook. That was a hard day's work there, I'll tell you.

Yes, right in the valley there, Mill Creek. That was a good job, but it didn't last. They said I'd get laid off, so I did. I got laid off there and then I still needed a job. So I walked over to the trucker's terminal in Edmonton at that time, and I got a job hauling freight from Edmonton to Jasper. I started loading in Edmonton, and my boss asked me if I ever drove a truck. I said, yes I did, I hauled wheat on the farm. How much weight? Well, 500 bushels. Ya, he said, you're on. So he gave me a tractor and a trailer, and turned me loose in Edmonton loading freight. I never knew Edmonton from nothing. I don't know if the old people remember Ashdown's Hardward on 104th Ave. & 103rd St., Scott Fruit, the grocery place, I forget what it's called. Anyway, we had to back off the street into a bay. Of course 103rd St. is a busy street. And Scott Fruit also, we had to back in there. Here's a rookie that's never backed one of these things up. The horns were blowing and the people were getting anxious, c'mon get out of there. But I made it anyway, and then I got on the road to Jasper. I worked there till, I spent 10 years in the trucking there, from Edmonton to Jasper, then Hinton. When the pulp mill started here in Hinton, it started about 1955. But a little bit before that there was a lot of freight coming in preparation to build the mill. There was freight and freight and freight. So at that time my boss asked me if I'd move to Hinton. I said, sure, that's fine. I was single, it didn't matter where I hung my hat. I came to Hinton and worked freight until 1964, when I thought I'd had enough of trucking. In those days we'd make a trip to Edmonton and back. The road was not like we have today. A trip in 1954 took 12 hours one way. So you can add that up, that adds to 24. A round trip took 24 hours, and there wasn't much time for sleeping and eating and

whatever else. But as the road got better the trip got shorter. At the end, the road was paved all the way. In those days I could make it to Edmonton one way in 3 hours with the truck. In those days, after 6 o'clock you had the road to yourself. It's not like today, the road is busy day and night. But in those days it was 6 o'clock and you could really pull the throttle back and go. I did 10 years of that and then I'd had enough of that. My family was coming. My kids were little guys. My son was born. What really changed my mind, I hadn't seen him for a long time. I was living at home, but I'd be sleeping and he'd be up, or vice versa. Anyway, one day I come home at suppertime. My boy didn't want nothing to do with me, he didn't know me. He hadn't seen this guy at all. I thought, this is not what I want, I want better hours. So I hired on at the mill in April 1963. They hired me and sent me to the camp 23. It was situated up close to the Big Berland and Moon Creek area, up in that country. At that time we stayed in camp all week, and come home. We even worked Saturday a half day. Saturday till noon, then the rest of the weekend was ours. A lot of us would head for town. My wife was in town, so we'd come home for the weekend, well come home for Saturday night and leave Sunday afternoon to get back. In the spring the road was terrible bad, and it was hard to get back, so we always left Sunday afternoon to get back for Monday morning. It was all horse crew.

The camp had a cookhouse and a kitchen. Mostly we had real good food there. The kitchen was one long table, and we ate at the table, and the food was passed between us. If you wanted the bread, if you couldn't reach it you asked for it. We had a long reach, us lumberjacks, we were damn hungry at the end of the day, and we could reach for bread quite a ways. The kitchen was good, clean, well looked after and well prepared. The bunkhouse, we had a dry room where we hung our wet clothes up, socks and boots and

jeans and shirts, and a big furnace going in there. Mostly it was wood, then later they got propane. It was constant heat there. Where we slept it was a long bunkhouse with 2 rows of beds, one row on each side. When it was warm it was warm, and when it was cold it was cold. The people sleeping closest to the stove, it seemed they were the high seniority guys, they got the warm area. The newcomers like myself, I got a bed way back in the corner. They were cooking and I was freezing. That's just the way it was.

In one bunkhouse there would be about 40 guys in one bunkhouse. Sometimes the bigger camps had 2 bunkhouses and even 3. When I started in April, there was 650 guys working in the bush. I'll never forget my number, my number was 652.

My number was 652. There was a lot of transient workers, they come and went, come and went. In about 3 years my seniority, my number got smaller and smaller. When I retired in 2000, I was number 3. It took that long to get down. There was 2 other guys, a fellow by the name of Hank Vanzelingim and Tony Gerrard. Hank was number 1 and Tony was number 2, and I was number 3. Like I said, it was horse logging. We got paid piecework. We logged by the cord, and our cord, my first pay by the cord was \$6.24 I believe, for a cord of wood. A cord of wood is 4 x 4 x 8, bucked and piled. The horse did the skidding.

Bucking is cutting the log in length. Bucking you got a tree, and you buck it into 8 foot lengths. Buck it into 8 foot lengths and then pile it. Pile it into a pile approximately 4 feet high. The pile would just keep growing as long as the block we were cutting lasted. We called it our strip, it was our strip of timber that I cut. We all worked in an area, it was called the block. A strip was divided between me and all the other cutters. We'd have at it and cut her down, and move on to the next block. The horses were the skidding power. It

was hard work for a horse too, it was hard work for the faller, for the logger. Mostly the horses were real good critters. The horse knew more about it than I did when I started. I had an old horse there, and he was just a real good worker. He stayed right with me. I treated him pretty good too. I used to chew Copenhagen. I would go out and fall the timber and limb it, and then I needed the skidder to come. I'd take my snuff box and rap my knuckles on it, and my horse would come. That saved me a lot of steps. He would come and bunt his head in my belly, and he wanted a chew. I'd give him a little pinch on his lip. He'd shake his head a little bit, and then we'd bring in some more logs. That was that horse. I also had one horse that, the company bought a bunch of horses from the Calgary stampede. The quit bucking. Some of them were mean critters. I can imagine they would be mean. In their trade they're supposed to be mean. They brought a bunch up to camp for us to make skid horses out of. Some worked real good. The one I got was a mean sucker. He would bite and kick you whenever he had a chance. I didn't like him. I refused to take him out. After 2 days I refused to do it. The foreman come along with me one day to see how mean this horse was. He just about got his head kicked off. He rattled the skid chain and the horse kicked, just missed him. But anyway, that was the life of the logger.

We had a barn boss, we called him the barn boss. My responsibility was to bring him in, water him, unharness him, and comb him. Then the barn boss looked after them at night, fed them and watered them again and fed them for the night. Then in the morning I'd go out and comb my horse and harness him. That's what we were supposed to do. But the horse 99% of the time didn't get combed in the morning, I can guarantee you that. We went to work. Pieceworkers are a different breed of people. Nobody needs to tell them to

c'mon it's 8 o'clock, let's move it. You get paid what you do. No do, no pay. That was fair. For all the years I worked there I worked piecework. It worked fine all those years, and we made our living like that. It was not a bad living either, working in the woods.

In those early days, I was going to get to that – in those early days I barely made by board at camp, and I think we paid \$2.50 a day board. Also I had to buy my gas for the power saw, and I had to buy my chains, oil, and files. At the end of my first month of work in the bush, greener pastures, bigger money, I brought home \$17 clear. Right then truck driving looked pretty good to me again. But I stuck with it, and it got better. And the snow dropped. When I started in April the snow was well over your knees. Not knowing the trade, not knowing what to do. There's wasn't any training like they have today. Go to work, that's it. I didn't know. I did a little bit of logging with my dad in cutting firewood and some saw logs, but nothing like to make a living at it. So it was a whole different ballgame. One of the old timers there, a Russian fellow, he said, work with me for a while, I'll show you. I worked with him for about 3 weeks, and we shared the profit, we shared the take. After that I knew what to do and I could make a living. I got up to where I was making 3 cords a day. At that time that was about \$14 a day. That's what the wages were. An 8 hour day was about that average all over. The mill, their labor rate was I think 88 cents an hour for an 8 hour day. But everybody was in the same boat, so it was alright. Like I said, a little experience and you got better at it, the money became more regular. You could almost count on \$300 or \$400 a month, so you could plan around that. We did, my wife and I, and we bought a house. We bought a house and I paid \$5000 for it, and I thought I would never get that house paid for. That was in '64. I really had a big debt

there to work off. Of course there again I was the same as everybody else. But it did pay the house off, and moved on. In about '67...

Yes there was. The union was there when I got there. At that time I had a choice of joining the union or not joining the union. I joined right away, because I'd had a few experiences with nobody to look after me when I was a kid. My cousin said, if you're not signing the paycheck, join the union. I said, ya right. And I wasn't signing the paycheck, so I said ya, I'll join the union. I was a union member all the years I worked there. We needed it. The company even needed it. Things happened that wouldn't have happened if there was nobody hollering. It happens today. It happens today, things are happening with contractors, unsafe working conditions, and so on. Well, get the job done. Get the job done, and if you want to work, go to work. If not, I'll get somebody else to do it. With the union, we had a base or good argument. Our biggest fight when the machines come was the slopes. We decided some slopes were too steep for a machine to work on, and yet we were doing it, and we shouldn't have been. We lost some guys. We lost some men that got killed on slopes that they had no damn business being on there with a machine. The machine would roll. Back in the early days there was no such thing as belts. I suppose if there were belts the guys probably wouldn't wear them anyway. But this one fellow rolled down the hill 7 times, and on the 6th roll he got thrown out and the machine killed him. We should've been on that slope. Then we come up with the idea that, hindsight, that slope was too steep, we should've been there. So now we're going to go with a certain degree of a slope, at the very most. I forget what they were now, but they were damn steep. You'd look up at the hill and your hardhat would fall off. Oh, I can handle that. We

were brave and young and stupid. But without the union helping to make some of these rules, they wouldn't have got made as quick as they have. So the union was alright. I joined the union willingly, and I was a union member all the years I worked there. It's done me alright. Non-union I wouldn't have a pension, just that much difference between the end of the life, and when you're 28 years old, who the hell's looking for retirement? Who's going to get sick? Not me, I'm 28 years old. Who needs sick pay? Stuff like that. We even went on strike for 4 months just for that: a pension and sick pay. We never got one penny raise in our wood per cord or per tree or nothing. We went back to work for the same money, but we had our sick pay and we had our pension plan. Today we look back, us old timers, and damn right, that was what we needed. I was the guy, I had a heart attack in '89, I was only 56 years old. And I'm on sick pay. Other places haven't got sick pay, and they don't even talk about it. Because the government will look after you. Leave it to the government, they'll look after you. Like our governments are looking after us now. They're raising our taxes, and they took away the seniors benefit of tax breaks on their housing. This year they talked about giving a little bit back. Well they did give a little bit back, we got a \$4 cut on our taxes. Before we had better. So the government's not looking after us as good as they make us think they're looking after us. And the feds are no different. They're taxing us hard. That's fine, if I'm working I don't mind paying tax. But I'm on a fixed income, and my taxes count. I've got to look after that. Anyway, I can't do much about that. But I do say union life is, union is better. Union at the end of the working career, the union is better. We do have our pension, which we wouldn't have, plus we have our Canada pension which we pay into anyway. That's ours in the first place, but that's a good idea too. People are people, and they damn well can't look after

their paycheck. They spend it on lottery or bingo or booze or both. Times goes by, and what happened to my money? They haven't got a pension. So a fixed pension is a wonderful thing for people. You can't have it till you're 65, that's the good part about it. Some people cry, well that's my money, that's my money. But give them that money now when they're 40 years old, they buy a nice new car and then they got no money again.

The union, for me, was good. I still am in favor of union, and I will support union. From where I come from, union would've been wonderful. But there was no union. I worked for a guy all winter long. He cut my finger off, it was his fault. I pulled up with that old Studebaker truck up to the office. My generator was discharging. I looked at the generator, it's discharging. So I stopped the truck in front of the office and went to see what's wrong with my generator. I'm in there fiddling around and checking to see if the belt is tight enough. In the meantime he stepped out of the office and jumped in my truck and started it, cut my finger off. He only cut one off, but the other 3 were scarred all to hell. I drove into town with the lumber and then I went to the doctor. I was only 15-1/2 or 16. The old doctor said, well that's compensation. I didn't know nothing about nothing. He notified the mill, and I got fired. Because look what I did to him, brought his compensation fee up a bit. I was fired before I was done bleeding. And I didn't get paid yet, he still owes me what money he owed me. Them were the days, the good old days, Bull Durham. Those were not the good old days, when there was nobody to look after a kid. A lot of us were kids working, and nobody looked after us. You were on your own. I shouldn't say I didn't get nothing from him – I got a pair of coveralls and the mitts I was wearing, mind you there were wore out by spring anyway. I got that much from him. But no, the union is the thing as far as I'm concerned. Then in 1967, back to the mill bush

here, they tried out the faller bunchers and tractor skidders, and got rid of all their horses. So we were all working with skidders, still falling and limbing with the power saw, but skidding with the tractor skidder. That went good too, that went better. Then at that time they started, instead of bucking and piling, they brought the long logs right to the mill here. That took a lot of work out of the bush, manual work. That bucking and piling was hard work. There was a lot of people with back problems in them days. They went long logging, that made it easier there. Then shortly after that they went to mechanical falling, where the falling was done with the machine, which was good too. Now you're out of the elements, there was less chance of getting hurt. It was just a safer job all around. We went doing that, and pretty quick after that they got the grapple skidders. They got rid of the chokers and mainline, and even the skidder operator now stayed in the machine out of the elements, out of the mud. It was a pretty good life. The loggers life is a pretty good life today. I don't think there's too many power saws working anyplace anymore, which is okay. That power saw was a hard job. It was a dangerous job too. I remember one time one of the fellows, well there was quite a few guys hurt. But one of the fellows, his saw kicked back on him, and it opened his belly up. We had to carry him out of the bush. One of the fellows said, you're gonna die. The guy laying on his back there opened up said, if I don't, when I get up, you're gonna die. But they sewed him back together and he come back to work eventually. But there was a lot of injury in the bush, power saw, getting hurt. And there were over the years that I was there enough deaths to make it, you really wondered if you were coming home today when you went. The widow makers got 2 or 3 fellows. The widow maker is a dead tree. It just falls when it feels like it. The fellow was out on the strip limbing, and the snag fell down and killed him. There was 2 or 3 like that,

and some other bad accidents. There was one fellow got caught in a barber chair. A barber chair is when the tree falls and it splits, half of it stays on the stump and the other half opens up. Then all of a sudden it clams shut, and a guy got caught in that. He ended up dead too. So there were some bad accidents that happened. The wind is always a factor. When it's so windy you know to stop. Everybody's different, some guys got more guts than the next guy. He'll keep falling, even in the high wind, and he shouldn't. But at that time when the crew doesn't come in, there'll be one that stays out working. Then somebody goes out, the foremen generally, goes out and brings him in. He shouldn't have stayed as long as he did, but there's always that last tree you gotta fall. That happens, and those are people. That's the way people are, everybody's a little different. So those were the days of logging in the Hinton area here. For me it was a good life. I went to the machine logging and enjoyed it. I enjoyed it very much. If I didn't like it I wouldn't have been there as long as I was. It was a good life. It was a healthy life. As long as I didn't get killed, it was a healthy life. But that's the way it went.

Yes, and we were responsible, when I was there too, to grease it and to check the oil and fuel. And right about this time of the year, it's freezing at night, to make sure the tracks were clean. The colder it gets the tracks freeze up and then in the morning you're not going no place, because it's froze. It was the company machine, but we were responsible for looking after it. I think things have changed there now too. I haven't been there for 15 years, but I think now they have qualified mechanics servicing the machine at the end of the shift. That's a good thing. Those boys are good.

Ya, fall the tree. Then the horse would take the whole tree to where the pile is, then buck it up at the pile.

That was I believe in '72, but I could be a year or 2 wrong there. There was an issue there of, of course naturally you want a raise. Sure we wanted a raise, but we also wanted some benefits, which we didn't have at that time. Sick pay we didn't have, and we didn't have a pension plan. The union thought we should be getting on that, we should be getting on having a pension plan. And we did, and we got it. But we didn't get a raise in pay. We'll get that next time, I guess, which we probably did. We didn't get it then, but we accepted the sick pay and the pension plan. And there was several other things that come up. We're pieceworkers and we're spending 1 hour walking to our strip. Let's talk about that. To start with, we leave town and drive an hour and a half, then we walk another hour to get to where we're logging. This is all cutting into my piecework time. So we settled some of those things too: walking time, traveling time, and all that. It come around that it was, well we all thought it was fair, otherwise it wouldn't have passed on a vote. I think every time you negotiate you go for something else. That's just life. Cost of living is always moving a little bit, little bit. When the union is negotiating, they're always shooting high, but you end up in the middle someplace and get what most everybody is happy with. So it was a good life for me.

We set our picket line at the wood yard. Any wood coming in to the wood yard, we stopped. Even then we didn't stop it all. We were pretty damn lenient, because the farmers from Edson or wherever they were coming from with a load of wood, selling ti to

the mill, we should've stopped them too. But, oh go in, unload, you only got 6 cords on there. We let them in. We did get into trouble though. We stopped the big boy, the railroad. The railroad was in loading pulp, and of course our fight isn't with the railroad or with the pulp workers in the mill. They're separate from us. Our problem only was with the mill and the timber. But we got a little carried away there. I say we, because we were the union. The train went in, loaded up a load of high bride pulp, and then we wouldn't let them out. The railroad people, they're union, they won't cross our picket line. No way, they won't cross at all. So the train stood there. Of course it's probably not going to stand there very long. I don't know what happened, I honest to god don't know. Overnight a piece of railroad track disappeared. Somebody cut it out and it's gone. So now the train can't come out regardless, picket line or not. It was funny but it wasn't funny. Holy smokes. The union's fight was not with the railroad, but they wanted to stop that pulp from going. They did, but then that only goes a little while too. Then the CN police took over, and they replaced the track. Then they come in on an engine. They were kind of, they overdid it by a hell of a long shot. They were standing on the cow catcher on front of the engine. You ever looked in the barrel of a 38 at close range? It almost makes you mad. They come in with guns drawn. Of course we've got some radicals, there always will be. We got guns at home too, we'll go get our guns. Holy smokes, now we got guns on both sides, and that's really not the way to go. I didn't approve of that myself. Anyway, the guys didn't come back with their guns. Then the RCMP come, and they give us 2 hours to clear the hell out of there. We left. Our fight wasn't with the CNR. But we did stop the pulp from going out, it was going to be a day or so late. I gotta say honestly, there's some people in management that love these kind of fights. We had one, and he

just loved to get the union on the warpath, and he just loved it. He was right in there, and he was management. Whatever we did or done was the wrong thing as far as he was concerned. He promoted a lot of aggravation. He's not there no more now, the old guy. And there's still some that like action, like fights, like rumbles. There's still some there now on both sides. They promote it and get enough people aggravated, then you got a problem. There's a lot of lumberjacks didn't mind a fight either. A barroom fight was a Saturday night occasion. You limbered up for Monday morning. A barroom fight was regular in the early days of Hinton. The bar would be so full. You had to buy 2 boxes of beer so you could have a place to sit. You sat on your 2 cases of beer. There was no fire regulations in them days either. There might've been, but they weren't adhered to in Hinton. Those were the days, in the logging in Hinton.

No, it was just local, just our local 207. When the union started here it was IWA, International Woodworkers of America. In the early '70s the Canadians broke away from the Americans in our union, and we became Industrial Woodworkers Canada. We were on our own then, we broke away from the international...

Peacefully, it was a peaceful division. Right after that, that was in '72, is when we, if we're going to break away from international, we want some reasons why the hell we should break away. One of them was the pension plan. The international across the border didn't have one, and wasn't looking to get one. That was one of the reasons that we broke away. It went pretty good. Just last year the industrial woodworkers amalgamated with the united steelworkers. I was at their last banquet meeting celebration, when the 2 joined peacefully. It wasn't a power takeover or nothing else, it was decided on both sides

to become one. Of course their name had to be changed then, we went to the Steelworkers. Some members were not quite satisfied, because now we're back to United Steelworkers of America again. There was quite a few that weren't in favor of joining back up with an American union, especially the woodworkers. You know the softwood lumber thing, the logger has much love for America regardless. You go talk to the guys that are unemployed in BC right now over this softwood argument, and there they sit. There's no work. They can't sell their lumber, all kinds of problems. You can see why a lot of the loggers and lumber workers didn't want to join up with an American outfit again. But I guess they'll work it out. They say they're going to work that softwood deal out. As long as Chretien was there, they never even talked about it never mind suggest that they might work it out. But of course elections are coming now, so Martin's talking brave and tough. If he can follow through with some of that, it might work, but I don't know.

All I can say is, as far as union goes, I am in favor of union. The people that I know have worked and done the same job I've done for all their working career, and they've worked for private owned contractors and they're the same age as I am. The only difference is they haven't got a pension. I got a pension, they haven't. And it's a hell of a big difference, as far as I'm concerned. You have a pension cheque of \$2000 a month, and you don't have one. You're gonna live fine on CPP and old age pension, period. And you're gonna pay your own health care and everything else, like I do too. But I've got my pension to help me with that. The guy over there done the same thing I did all these years, and he don't have it. He should've had it. They fought hard to keep the union out. And

they won, they cut the union out. Till now, they wish the hell they'd have let them in, and had a pension. It's too late now, buddy. All you can do is tell the young guys, join the union, because you're going to end up like us old guys too. We're all going to end up white hair and old one day. It comes on slowly, but it comes, yes sir, it sure does.

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