

Jean Ross

I'm 67 years old. I was born in Vermillion, Alberta. But I didn't live in Vermillion. My dad was grain buyer for the wheat pool, and we lived in a small town called Clandonald until I was 10 years old. I had a twin brother, and I have another brother and a sister. When we were 10 years old we moved to Marwayne, down by the Saskatchewan border. Our parents bought a restaurant. ?'s home had been near there, so we lived there for about 4 years. My dad in the meantime had had a stroke and was not able to work. So we moved to Calgary. I went to school here. Then I started working for the city, no that's not true. I worked for the federal government for 5 years. That was my first experience with the union. I worked for the Air Force and I was a member of UNDE, Union of National Defence, whatever, the forerunner of that was. Never really bothered too much with them, but knew they were there, knew they took money off my paycheque, as most people do. That was in the '50s. I'd been doing a job for about 2 or 3 years, then all of a sudden they put out a posting for this job, because it was in the Diefenbaker years when, in the federal government, everything was cut. Finally they got enough money or whatever, they were going to post this job. I didn't get the job. I'd been doing it for 2 years and I had really created the job. So I was very upset. I went to the union and said, what are you going to do for me? They said, you're on your own. We haven't had a raise, and we're in the middle of bargaining, we think we're going to get a raise. We don't want to have any grievances because it might upset you. You can imagine how I felt. So I went by myself. It was military, so it was a very military situation. I got to sit at the end of the table all by myself in this grievance hearing. The squadron leader and the flying officer

and whoever were all in uniform with their ? and everything. It was very intimidating. I was only 22 or something. When I was young I wasn't as outgoing as I am now. I used to be quite introverted. It was very difficult for me. Needless to say, I didn't win the grievance. So I quit and went to work for the city. When I first started working for the city, I belonged to NUPE. Then I started going to union meetings, cuz that was my experience with the union. Prior to that, when we lived in Clandonald, my dad worked for the wheat pool. My dad had a bit of a drinking problem. There was some grain cars stolen, and the guy that was in charge said to my dad, perhaps you should take the fall for this. If you don't, there's going to be problems about... it wasn't my dad. That was where I got my social conscience from, because even at 10 years of age I knew that wasn't fair. I remember saying to my mom, can't we do something? That was in 1946. I went to work for the city, and I worked at the electric system for about 2 years. That was another place where I learned my social conscience. I was having a baby, and of course there was no maternity leave, no nothing. Kelly was born in '62. They promised me if I needed to come back they would give me a job. Of course those promises went by the wayside. I eventually went back to work for the city. In the meantime I worked for the IBW for a short period of time. I met Beth Wishar, and that was when I really learned some tough union principles from her. Then I went back to work for the city and I got involved in CUPE. Then from there I was involved in all the various offices of my local. I remember the first time I went to a convention at the Federation of Labour. That was in 1963. . . . This was at the Alberta Federation of Labour convention. I was elected as a delegate from local 38. Barb Lossen and I were the only 2 women. Even in those years, because 38 was always a very big local, so we did have quite a few delegates. I just went back to work for

the city in the spring of '62. We used to have conventions in the fall, but anyway it had been about a year that I was back and involved. I knew a bit about unions, but not a lot. When we got to the convention Jacqueline was the president of our local, and he was introducing some people. He said, this is Jean and Barbara, they're members of our social committee. I knew at that very moment that was not right for him to do that. We were both members of the executive. I'm sure Felix Hagel was at that convention, who was also on the social committee. We happened to be, but that wasn't our prime purpose there. I thought, there's something not right here. I decided that from now on you're not going to introduce me as a lady anymore. I'm going to get involved in some of this stuff. So the next couple of executive meetings that I went to, I kind of took on a few people. I didn't get elected the next time around, so I was off for a year. Then I got smarter and realized how to get elected and how to do things. Then from there on I went. When I first went back after working in the engineering department, I worked as a secretary for the sewage construction engineer, in 1970 I went out to work at the sewage plant as a timekeeper. Mind you 1970, that's not that long ago. On the posting for the job it said, women with senior city service are invited to apply. Imagine. So I applied for the job and got it. It was a Clerk III, not very much money. But better than a secretary's. But always considered a man's job. So anyway I got that. I worked there and got very involved in my local. Then I got involved in the division, and I was secretary treasurer from '73 to '78. In the meantime, I went as a business agent for the local union in 1977. Then from there after I went to work for the local, then I went to work for the national union. I was a servicing rep for a couple of years, and then I was the education rep for about 15 or 16 years. I retired in 1996 at the age of 60. In the meantime, I was involved in all the political

positions you could be involved in. I was the first woman president of the division. I was President of the Calgary District Council. I was Vice President of the Labour Council. Not all at the same time. I was the 2nd Vice President of the Alberta Federation. I was on the Federation executive for a period of time. A lot of all those kinds of things. Was instrumental in trying to get women's issues brought to the forefront. I was interested in social issues, and I can remember saying sometimes they weren't women's issues, they were people's issues. But I always fought hard for women's issues. I'm not so sure they're still around. I think some of these local unions have given them up, because it's so tough on unions right now. Then I retired. I haven't been very involved. For me it was, I had done my job and I'd done it, I thought very well. I was very successful. All the plaques and letters I got showed that. But for me it was time to go, and I went. I found it hard to still be involved and not be working and not be part of it. A lot of people resented that. My predecessor did very much. So I stopped for a while, and then I got involved in other things. I've always been very involved in as much as I could be, and now I'm involved with my church. I'm very involved with the food bank, I work with the food bank. I mentor a student at the Cochrane Middle School. And I look after my grandchildren. And I do crafts, as you can probably see. And that kind of thing.

Yes, I knew there was something I forgot. I did serve on the National Executive Board. I have the distinct honour of being on the national board 3 times, and never been elected concurrently. Because every time I got on there and I didn't play the games they liked me to play, then they threatened to get rid of me and they did. Then I came back again, and I keep coming back. Then I was on the division, I was president of the division and on the

national executive board when I started working full time for CUPE. That's true, I forgot about that. That was an experience.

No, I wasn't, because in those days it was the men that went to those things. The national conventions and the CLC conventions, they were a perk for members in the union. They didn't necessarily send people that did the best jobs, they sent people who it was perk. And quite often it was the men who were in the higher office positions, so they got to go. I eventually... they'd let you go to the federation conventions. They got so many, they couldn't stop you. But I never got to a division convention for a long time either, and I never got to a congress convention until 1974. That was very exciting for me, because that was the year Shirley Karr was elected as a woman on that... her and that guy from Quebec. I liked those campaigns where they were against the establishment. And on the national executive board, I found it really an interesting experience. It was very difficult when you sat there, and I thought my role was to represent my area. I was there to represent Alberta. And yet sometimes you could see the good of the whole union, and sometimes it's very difficult. Because you would make decisions based on the good of the union totally, and then you would come back to Alberta and take so much flack for some of the east/west stuff. It was a real eye opener for me. When I first got involved, I was very green and very... maybe naïve. I really thought the union was god. I thought the union was wonderful. I was always excited about stuff. I got interested in campaigns. I really thought it was really a place to help working people. When I first got involved, particularly when I went to Labour Council, you could get up and say whatever you liked and nobody said you're stupid or whatever. They didn't always agree with you, but they

gave you the right. You didn't have to say it like, if you weren't that well educated, everybody was entitled to say. CUPE was like that at one time too. You could go to conventions and stand up and have the right to disagree with each other. I always thought that was marvellous. When I got to Ottawa I got some of that kicked out of me. I found out that unions were no real difference than corporations or other kinds of organizations. They had their power politics and things going on. Some of the things they would try to get you to vote or not vote for. Of course they probably thought when they saw me, here's somebody we can really convince to do these things. Because she's really green and naïve. I often used to say, when I first went on staff, I kind of wished that I could go back to being just a member where I still thought everything was wonderful. Because after awhile it... I still enjoyed it and I really did enjoy being an education rep. Because I got people who were green, who were new, who really thought the union was wonderful. I was able to share my personal views with them. I never told them the bad stuff or the stuff that was underground. You'd send them away, they would be so excited about it. Sometimes I used to think, because they used to hang onto every word you said. If you told them how to handle a grievance in a general sense, sometimes they'd go back and I'd get a rep phoning saying, what did you tell those people? They took everything you said literally. But I found that was the most rewarding part of being part of the union.

Yes he was. And Grace was the secretary treasurer.

I don't remember very much about that. That was more the executive committee. You know how they used to have the executive committee and the GVP and that. They were more, I don't remember, it may have been before I got on there.

I don't think I was there till '75. That would've been just before that.

Exactly. And we had too many women to suit them.

The other thing I remember when I was on the national executive board the year, I think Grace was president, we had that coup at the convention. There was a resolution, it might've come from BC. I remember Harry was involved in it. About putting national board members on committees, and that committees should be from the grass roots. We had the opening of the convention, some of us were involved in that. My sister wasn't very happy with me over that deal. That was a lot of fun. That was my first one at a national level, where I was able to do some rabble rousing. And we won the day in that one. Then the other time, one of the times when I first came on staff in May of '82, when the congress had moved their conventions to the spring. I had been already a delegate from 38 and had had my name sent in. So they let me go to the convention. They weren't fussy about it, but they let me go. That was the time that the congress was trying to come in with cutting down delegations. Calgary Labour Council was opposed to that. So I went to the mic, even though I was on CUPE staff, I was representing 38 there and wasn't representing staff. I was going to speak against. But Grace had made a deal and was in favour of it. They'd made a deal in order to get seats on the executive board for the congress. McAllister was her executive assistant. He came to the mic and told me that I couldn't talk. That was when the whole thing blew my mind. Here we are, we're no better than anybody else. We're just like bloody dictators, and if you don't do the party line,

you'll be out of here. I remember saying to him, I'm going to stay. He said, just remember where you are now. Then I realized I was on staff and I had made that choice, so I'd better be good about it.

It does make a difference. You're not as free as they like to think you could be. So that was kind of interesting.

Beth Wichar. Yes. . . . I always admired Art Roberts and Harley Horne and those guys. I don't know if you'd put Harley in the position of a great orator, but they could get up and mics and speak. That was something I always learned from them, yourself too. I got so that after awhile I got pretty good at it myself. One of the things is if you're coming from the heart and you really believe in what you're saying, that's what I used to try and teach people in my public speaking courses. Don't be afraid to get up there and say what you feel. People need to know those things. You may be afraid at the start, but you won't be if it's your passion and you care about it. I admire Grace Hartman. I think she was a good woman. I'm not sure that she surrounded herself with, but that happens to all of us I guess. Yes, she went to jail, her and Ricky Nicholson and Ray Arsenol. That was the hospital workers' strike in Ontario. They said it wasn't legal. She went to jail for 3 months. She wouldn't come out for good behaviour, she stayed her full term. Her and I became quite good friends. I remember talking to her about that. She must've been in her 60's when that happened to her. And a very fine woman. She did dishes and laundry and everything. She said one of the things that was interesting to her was what influence she had on the young women that were in there that were more hardened. How they would

come and talk to her. She did petit point. She said Joe would bring her in the needles. They're quite thick for petit point, bigger than sewing needles. She said that was one of the most humiliating things, because Joe would have to go through this every time. They knew that these needles were used for petit point. Eventually they would let her have them. I really admired her, because she stood by her principles. I'm sure if she'd have pulled some strings she might've got out. But she decided that was her position. She was president of the national, and she went. She stayed right to the last day.

That's right. She said it might be an illegal strike, but as long as you trample on the workers, no strike will be illegal. Something like that. She was very adamant about that. I'm sure there's lots of people. Another person that really impressed me and influenced me a lot was Les Huson. He used to be president of the division. He was a very fine man. I learned all my parliamentary procedures from him. I thought he was the best parliamentarian in Canada. Better than a lot of national officers. He was a really fine man and he taught me a lot of things. He opened up lots of doors for me and helped me a lot. He was cute in some ways. When I first got on the division executive as well, they weren't so fussy about us women running around doing things. So when there would be an opportunity to go as a fraternal delegate somewhere, he would always take the position, knowing full well he couldn't always get time off, then he could delegate. Then he would delegate me, so I could go. That way I got a lot of experience. Another person who helped me a lot in the early days was Jim Murry. He was very kind to me. He was good to me as an officer of the division, and especially when I was on the national board. Nobody could really prepare you for that. When you go down there, there's nobody else,

well I had Les, because he was the general VP. But there may be 2 of you from each province if you're lucky. So you don't have a lot of allies. Another thing you don't have, is you don't see those people once every 3 months or something. So that was hard. Another person that really influenced me in some ways, some not so good because he used to make me very angry a lot of times, but was Orly Campo. He was a funny man. Different, but he was very meticulous about details. He was very meticulous about minutes of meetings. He taught me that, and he also taught me when you're in a grievance hearing or that, make sure you've got everything. Even if you didn't use it, at least there'd be no surprises when you got to the table. When you're representing a grievance. That nobody could say to you, ... oh by the way, did you know? Well if you knew, you could get around it. But if you didn't know, it's pretty hard to wipe the egg off your face. Then the employer knows your griever didn't tell you anything. He was one of my mentors. Of course he was very involved in 38.

I did. I went there in 1980. No, I quit in 1998. It was 18 years on there.

Initially you could really help claimants, within reason. But then as governments changed, it got so that they just tied up all the holes there was. You just had such a hard time helping people. For the most part people, they made some silly mistakes, but it wasn't because they're bad people. It's just because they didn't understand paperwork. Or we used to get a lot of guys from the oil patch. They were busy going from job to job. They didn't have time to worry about filling out things. There were some that were blatant, but for the most part...I enjoyed that, except I found, and that's one of the reasons I quit, I found it once it went to EI, I found it too restrictive. I didn't feel I was doing the

job I was supposed to do. Once they cut back all the weeks, they hardly made it. They went to the hours and everything. I didn't want to be part of something I didn't really believe in.

No I never did. I was asked to many times. The thing I don't like about politics, and I don't know how you'll ever change it, is that a couple of times I thought very seriously about it. But I didn't want to, like if I could've run for politics and said who I was and what I wanted and offered, that was fine. But I didn't want my family involved in it. I didn't want Kelly to suffer the consequences of my actions. They won't leave those things alone. Your personal life to me shouldn't be part of it. I didn't want to get involved in that. I didn't need all that. But I worked on lots of campaigns for the NDP.

I got involved in some of the ward alderman campaigns. A number of years ago, when I first started working for the city, there was no wards. Then we would get involved. I did a lot of door knocking and delivering, because at that time it did make some difference. At one time the labour movement in Calgary had a lot to do with who got into city hall. Quite often the mayor, we always got very involved in the mayor's elections. Which I don't think anybody should make apology for. Because they were our bosses, and we should've got more involved that we did. But no, I never ran. I was too busy. I was raising a child by myself and I was involved in the labour movement and I still had to work. The time never seemed to come. Just something I never did.

[tape side 2] . . . till years and years later. Our dad was too, but our mother was a wonderful woman. She made things for us. We were really well loved. My mother also

was a really good cook. We never really thought about not having things. I remember one year my brother and I went to school, and of course as I said before, we're twins. We were in a schoolhouse grade 1 to 9. Campbell, my twin brother, was very sick when he was in grade 2, so he failed. After that I was a year older than him, not a year older, a year more in grade. He's only 10 minutes older than me. In those small schools they used to send all the stuff home with the oldest child in the family. So I used to think once I passed him in grades I should be able to take the notice home. We used to fight over that. It came Christmas time. After Christmas, the teacher says, now what did you get for Christmas? Of course everybody goes around the room and says. We hadn't got anything for Christmas. We got Japanese oranges and bananas we didn't have the rest of the year. Mom knitted clothes for a doll I had, and for my sister. But we didn't think. So when it came my turn to say what I got for Christmas, I lied and said I got a new doll and this and that. It got to Campbell and he lied too. We never talked about it before. On the way home I said to him, why did you lie? You didn't get that stuff for Christmas. He said, why did you? I said, it didn't bother me at all, but I didn't want those kids to know we didn't have anything. But wasn't that funny that he did it as well. I don't think he did it cuz I did it, I think he just was gonna do it. I've always been opposed to people doing those things, because I think they embarrass children in schools. Because what difference does it make what you get? We were poor but it never bothered us because we didn't think we were. But we had a bit of a tough time too because our father drank. The kids that we went to school with, one that lived next door, they were twins a couple of months younger than us. Their dad was the bank manager. Another girl I was friends with, her father ran a hardware store. So they all had more money than us, and more things. Of course they

liked to rub it in because our dad drank. In those years, the beer parlour used to close at suppertime. So my mother would send us, Campbell or I, to the beer parlour to bring dad home at suppertime. I used to hate it. I used to always say it wasn't my job, it should be a boy's job. But she was quite equal in that sense. We lived in the edge of town and we had to go kitty corner across the sports ground. There we'd be coming along, and dad would be weaving around. Everybody would see it, because they lived on the ring of it. I used to think that those were tough times. Another time, this girl her name was Marion, and she had beautiful long blonde hair. I always had really short black hair. My mom kept it really short because it was curly. One time I got in a fight. She called my dad a drunk and I said, you can't say that about my dad. I pulled her all the way across the sports ground. I had to go over later and apologize to her mother for pulling her hair out. But as I say, people would tell you those things. Although we weren't very proud of that business about my dad, but he was our dad and that's what people did in those days.

Clandonald. It really did. It was really a wonderful reunion. It was 50 years that I had been back. I believe it was the 75th anniversary of the town. But anyway we went. They had all the old pictures. I had a lot of people I hadn't seen. Only one family, the twins, we always kept in touch with them. I was so happy, because I was able to take my grandchildren to see the house I grew up in. It belonged to the wheat pool and was a company house and we rented it. And being able to show them the grain elevator that dad bought grain at. Quite a bit of the stuff had been kept up. That was a great experience. And to take my daughter as well.

It was marvellous. My father came from Ireland in 1909 and he was 20 years old. My mother was born in 1909. When they got married he was 20 years older than her. But he ran away from home because his father wanted him to be a schoolteacher and he didn't want to be a schoolteacher. His father was a school master at a school for boys. He was the principal there for 35 years. We really didn't know much about my father's family, because my dad had a stroke when we were 10 years old. It left him speech impaired and he never spoke. He spoke, **but in a, he** was all there in his head. That was 1947. If it happened to somebody today they'd get them talking again, but in those years they didn't. So all we knew about our dad and his family was what he had told our mother before we were around. We were 10 and that's about the age you start talking about things to your parents. We goes to Ireland, my daughter and her husband and my 2 granddaughters. We went on a 13 day tour of the whole of Ireland, the north and the south. It was absolutely marvellous. Then we went to, dad's people live in Belfast. We went and I seen 2 first cousins and a 2nd cousin. The one cousin had the old family bible, so I was able to get some names. My dad came from a family of 12, there were 4 boys and 8 girls. We knew there was a large family, but we didn't know the numbers. I got such a kick out of it, because my father's father, my grandfather, was a teetotaller, and was involved with the White Knickers or something in Ireland. He was a very staunch Presbyterian. No wonder my dad drank when he came to Canada. One of my first cousins, whose mother was my dad's sister, he said apparently grandpa Ross used to take them. They went to church 3 times on Sunday. My dad was very anti-church. They were Presbyterians. I always thought the way dad acted when we were kids was that it was the business of the Catholics and Protestants, it was just church period. And my mom was kind of churchy.

John Ross, his name is, he said the old man used to trot the 12 of them. He would lead them, and the 12 of them would be going along, then the mother at the end. They would go to church 3 times, and they walked all the time. He said the grandpa was not beyond switching the boys if they didn't move along fast enough. John Ross says he thinks that the boys got it quite a bit from the old guy. Then he got me some papers and stuff. My grandfather had gone as high as you could be in the laity of the Presbyterian church. This paper he got, he had never missed a communion table for 43 years. My brother in Toronto said, 'didn't he ever take a holiday?' What did he do, if he was always at the communion table? That was very interesting, because my dad was really anti-church. He wouldn't even let us be baptized. They took us to a place where they lived when they were young. They took us to a place where they had a cottage. The cottage was gone, but the lake and all the stuff was there. They took us there. I never knew very much about it, but I felt like I had gone home, like I had found my roots. I just loved it. If I could figure out how to live there, because it's expensive, I would move there. Another thing, I know the green grass they have, they must have a lot of rain. We were lucky there wasn't any rain there. But it was a great experience. My granddaughters are 10 and 12, so that was the best part. They'll remember the trip. But let me talk a bit about my daughter. I'm very proud of my daughter. She was raised most of the time through all my union involvement, and they used to call her the red diaper baby because I took her to everything. One time when I was secretary treasurer of the division and she was about 8, I was getting the stuff ready for the convention. Mom was sitting in a chair stuffing envelopes. I was getting stuff ready, mom was stuffing and Kelly was licking the stamps. Kelly is my daughter. She said, you know, we sure do a lot of stuff for this CUPE don't

we, grandma? When she started working she worked for the city. She worked there when she went to university. She has a degree in political science. She was very involved in the union, local 38, my old union, cuz she worked at city hall. Now she's in management, she went to the other side, the dark side, we say. But she's doing very good. I'm very proud of her because she has really good union principles. And she's a decent, honourable young woman. She used to have a very tough time when she went to school. At the time she was going to high school, I was very involved and I was in the media a lot. That's when I was involved with 38, the city staff workers and also the division. When she was going to school, when she'd apply for a job or something, as soon as she said her name was Ross, they'd say, what about this union stuff? Which was totally unfair and unreal. You could figure out she was going to be a unionist, but even so it didn't seem very fair. She had a very tough time at school too, in high school particularly. Most teachers, for some unknown reason, weren't NDPers. In social studies classes, peoples' understanding of the NDP and some of the policies we have is very mysterious sometimes. One time she came home and said something was said about the NDP. She cracked at the teacher, which wasn't such a good thing to do. She said, 'was I right mom?' I said, 'yes you were right.' She went back and told them. In the meantime she had phoned Grace Hartman, because she knew Grace. She had phoned her to find out what was the correct stuff, cuz I was away. When I came back. She really did have a tough time in school, but she really is a wonderful young woman.

I think the best part about her in her management job is that she's very good with the workers. She's been a union steward and was involved in the union. She does have a better understanding and treats them better than some managers do.

I was always very proud to work for working people. I was always very happy. Glad I did it. Would I do it again? I don't know. I've thought about that a lot since I've retired, because I'm not very well. A lot of it is stress-related illness that was caused by working for... but probably if I'd worked anywhere else I'd have put my heart and soul into it anyway. So maybe that's the way it is. But I did enjoy my career with the union very much.

I think if you were to honestly look at it and be realistic about it, it's changed a lot. I think sometimes our expectations are, it shouldn't be, but I guess it has changed a lot. When I had my daughter, and she's 42, there was no maternity leave. You had to quit. When I first started working for the city, and up until about 1970 and both the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary, you had to quit if you got married, because they assumed that your husband would look after you. That you didn't need a job. There's so many things. But I think the unfortunate part, and I'm really excited about what you're doing with this history, because I think a lot of it, and it's true in the whole trade union movement and other movements, is that we don't do enough history. So people don't realize how lucky they are and where they're at. We used to have a minister at our church, a woman minister. She has a daughter that's about 25. She's always reminding her how hard we fought to get things. This minister, if she's doing a wedding service, she won't say that obey. She won't do that who gives you away? She says nobody can give you away. If the bridal party don't agree to that, she won't do the wedding. She's a very strong feminist as

well. But like she was saying, we need to tell these young people that all the stuff they take for granted now they didn't get it. We all worked hard for it.

The other thing I keep saying is that the business of, I never realized it until I was retired, is the medical plan we have with CUPE is absolutely marvellous. That business of just going into the drugstore and getting what you have to have. I was at the drugstore the other day because I have quite a bit wrong with me. My pills were \$600. I just get them and he bills Greenfield, and it's wonderful. But people fought for that, and I hope they're still fighting, quite frankly. I keep reminding my brother Stewart in Edmonton that he'd better look after us old people. I just have a sense that there is so much. And I think what's happened has been wonderful, and there's a lot more probably could be done. But I get very upset, and it's the same as in schools. My grandchildren, the stuff they don't know. I say don't you ever talk about this kind of stuff? They don't talk about history. There's no Alberta history in schools, it's luck if there's any history. They don't talk about stuff. People need to know how we fought to get this stuff. Whoever fought, I don't care who gets the credit. Just let them know that it's been a hard fight.