

Jack Hubler

I'm 66. I was born in High Prairie, Alberta. The name given to me then was John Paul Hubler. But of course now I'm known to everybody as Jack Hubler. But the John Paul thing, we've had a little bit of fun with at my expense over the last number of years. To everybody I'm Jack Hubler.

My dad was born in Wisconsin. As a young man he came to Canada in a couple of cattle drives. I guess he came to like the country. On one of the trips he went back and got everything organized. Then he stayed in Canada. That would've been about 1915, '16. He ended up in northern Alberta and got into the fishing industry, and eventually ended up in a little town in Lesser Slave Lake called Jousard. That's where we were living at the time I was born. My two other brothers were born also. My mother was born in Rocky Mountain House. Her father was a piano tuner. He made a living that way, and they travelled all over the place. They ended up in Jousard, of course. That's when my mom and dad met, and they were married in 1935. Then from there he started the mink ranch. That was our living and his main interest. A number of years later the mink farming industry kind of went by the wayside because of poor fishing in the lake and things, things that we're really aware of nowadays, but actually happened back then too. I was born in High Prairie and went to school in Jousard until grade 6. Then we were bused to High Prairie. It was kind of a long trip, cuz it was gravel roads in those days, and not very good gravel for that matter. So it was about an hour and a half drive on the gravel road to

High Prairie to go to school. That was for junior high, and then high school we went to Kinuso, which was about another hour the other side of Jousard, but still along Lesser Slave Lake. Eventually I did complete high school. My mom went to a convent, and she never said very good things about that. But she stuck with it and learned what she could, and she got to about grade 8 or 9. In some cases you thought she had a university education. And my dad too. On his way through Canada he stopped off some places and got involved with agriculture to some extent. Then he made his way to northern Alberta. So the agriculture part, of course, proved really worthwhile. It meant we didn't have much money, but we lived pretty good anyway. At least we had lots to eat. There was lots of fish and lots of vegetables and stuff anyway. That's about how it happened with my parents when I came to be born in northern Alberta.

I finished my high school there. During the summer breaks while in high school, one of the jobs was working on a telegraph line. That was the type of line where the Morse Code was still used. Wasn't long after it was gone, but it was still used then. So we repaired that line a few miles each side of the town. The next job was working as a labourer in a refinery in Grande Prairie. It was a union project, but we got hired on locally because so many people locally were to be hired. That was my first introduction to the construction industry, and the union to that extent. The next job I had, I was working as a welder's helper in Grande Prairie. They were installing gas lines into the town of Grande Prairie. I come to work with pipe and with a welder. They were talking union, and I was picking up lots as I went along. After we finished high school, my brother and I decided we were going to go get on the DEW Line; that was the Mid-Canada Line about 1955 or '56. The

headquarters for this thing was in Dawson Creek. We made our way to Dawson Creek and hung around a couple of weeks and tried to get hired on, and we couldn't. We were down to our last dollar and we went in and had a bowl of soup. Walking out of the restaurant, I saw this thing on the street, crumpled up. I picked it up and there was two \$20 bills. Somebody's misfortune was our good fortune, because about a week later, we got hired on this main central where the Mid-Canada Line was going to be centred, at Dawson Creek. They had this huge complex there and a number of complexes. Then from there, there were little satellites all across Alberta. We went a ways across Alberta. We got hired on and it was a union project. The unions were all out of Vancouver. That was a really good education. Here we were in this beautiful camp and all these nice meals; the paycheques were on time. But one of the unique things was that I ended up on the crew that was laying the water lines and the sewer lines. Something was happening that was going to be my destiny that appeared anyway. So I finished that and we finished in late that fall. I went to Mount. Royal and picked up a couple of courses that I wanted to, and it was very interesting. Went back to, my parents were then living at Faust. It was a lumber/mink farming town, still in Lesser Slave Lake. They had moved there. So I stayed there a little while and got fed up pretty good. So it was time to move on. I came to Edmonton. An aunt of mine and her 6 kids. I thank them very much. They took me in and made me a place to stay and whatever. I eventually found a job, and of all things it was laying sewer pipe. So this piping thing, it looks like it was really going to stay with me. Then I got a chance to work with the plumbers. We were laying sewer pipe right around a housing project. The plumbers asked me to work with them. So I got a little feel of it. A friend of mine asked me if I wanted to go to work for a bigger contractor. They

were working on a school at Griesbach Barracks. So I said sure. So I went down there. I got hired on. It was a union contractor and a plumbing contractor. From there on there was no getting away from this piping. It was going to happen. It looks like it was leading up to this for many years before. Looking at it now, that's kind of the way it looked. Got hired on, was going to get my apprenticeship papers all signed up and a union membership. And they went on strike. They went on strike in 1958, and it was a cold winter. One of the picket lines was at Royal Alec. I used to go down there, because had big barrels, big fire and at least you could keep warm. So I enjoyed that. Go down there just about daily. Eventually the strike got over and they settled it. We went back to work. Very shortly though, that job came to an end. I ended up with Lockerbie and Hole. That's actually who I started my apprenticeship with. The first job I went to was the Kingsway Motor Hotel. This year it was torn down. So I guess that says something, when the buildings you've worked in are already being destroyed and something else is taking its place. That was the first job after the strike. My rate was 90 cents an hour as a first year apprentice. They couldn't have got too much out of the strike. But I guess that's the way it happened in those days. You'd get 10 cents an hour for a year and 10 cents for another year. That was standard in those times, and they were gradually feeling their way in. Getting there, as the union movement came along I got transferred from there to a building at the University. It was called the Phys/Chem Building. The Phys/Chem building was a big building, and Lockerbie and Hole had the contract. One of my supervisors was a fellow named Ted. Later I come to know it was Ted Hole. At that time he used to talk to us, he was buying a farm. He bought this farm out at St. Albert. As we know now, his wife later became the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. That was unique at

the time. Ted passed away this year, and that was kind of unfortunate. He wasn't that old, but he was well in his 70's. But that was kind of unique, to have that as an interesting point in my life. I thought that was interesting. Anyway, that's when I started my apprenticeship. Got through the apprenticeship. It was a tough time to some extent. Like I said, the rate was 90 cents an hour although things weren't as expensive as they are now. Things were much different 45, 50 years ago. We went to school in Calgary because there was no NAIT at the time. Because I was married, we got \$15 a week. That was to keep your home in Edmonton, to keep yourself alive in Calgary, and to buy food in Calgary, and to get back and forth. So I knew then, there's lots of stuff to do here yet for everybody in this industry. Maybe that's something that pushed me a bit to later on get as involved as I did. Looking back now, it really wasn't very much to survive on. Later on it came to be that it was equivalent to UI, which was rightly so and what it should be for somebody too, cuz there was no wages. Maybe some employers picked up some wages for their employees, but most didn't. You were basically going to school, and the wages stopped.

I started my apprenticeship; well, I signed after the strike in 1959. I started my apprenticeship in 1959. I went 4 years into Calgary. There was an old hangar there on 16th Avenue, very good instructors and very knowledgeable. It was a great school, from that perspective. Learned a lot, and learned how to become a tradesman.

Yes. Then once it moved to NAIT, then things started to change quite a bit. Things started to happen a little bit more as the union became more and more chance to do something

for the membership. They were just coming out after the war in the '50s. But they were starting to get things put together a bit. Like I said, I made application in 1958 to join the union, but never really got initiated until 1964. From 1960 to '64 there wasn't a collective agreement. The union had decided there was not going to be a collective agreement unless there was a union security clause which meant that in construction unions you were going to be hired through the union hiring hall. That's where you get your dispatch slip. Then you would go to work. You weren't going to be hired on any more at the various offices and shops. So it took 4 years without an agreement. But they were pretty determined in those days that they were going to have this clause. I guess all the construction unions were determined this union security was going to be finally put into place in the Edmonton area.

It provided that you were hired at the union hiring hall. You weren't hired off the street into their office. That was the key thing to everything, to start getting that getting put into place. They went 4 years without a collective agreement. Finally in 1964 they got this agreement that did get the union security clause. They got an introduction into pension and health and welfare. Wasn't much, but it was a start. Then from 1964 to 1968 there were some collective agreements put into place and things were getting a little better. That's when I started to get involved. I was a job steward and started to get involved with whatever I could around the union. That was a real breakthrough in 1964, and a lot of credit to a lot of people at that time that stood their ground and knew what they wanted and what they were going to get. It was a pretty good fight, but in the end they got it. There was Norm Divershire, Sam Lee, some of the people I can recollect that were key

people in this thing. Norm Divershire was later killed in 1976 in a motor vehicle accident. He was still the business manager. He was killed in a motor vehicle accident in 1976 on his way to a union meeting. I became interim acting business manager. There was the type of people that they were going to have this security clause. I followed it through those times. Then in 1968 I ran for the negotiating committee and became the 1969, we got what we called the 1969 collective agreement. It was a very progressive agreement. That's when we really moved ahead on the health and welfare and pension. We introduced the seven and a half hour day into the construction industry. That came in during the term of that agreement. The supplementary benefit fund, which now is a big thing in the local union and provides bursaries for members' children, donations to United Way, charities, and those kind of things. The inception was then. Travel time, rotation leave, and things like that were all introduced in that 1969 agreement. It was forerunner to a whole lot of things that were later to happen. It was a highlight in my beginnings in the union movement, to be on that committee and do the things we did. Those were not easy times, but they were much better times than now in some ways, for employment and those type of things.

In the latter part of 1969 I was working on a job in the southern part of the jurisdiction of Local 48 on the Red Deer area. I crushed my heel. I was off work for pretty close to a year. It's never been the same since, but I learned to get around and live with it. When I came back to the workforce, I ended up in warehousing and things like that. I thought, I'd better look at something here. I always had the inclination I wanted to be involved

anyway, and this spurred it on a little bit more. In 1972 I ran as business agent, was elected in 1972. Then we started our term in 1973.

I got more involved in the union. Somebody suggested at one of the union meetings that I should be a delegate to the Labour Council. I thought okay. I was kind of interested in it anyway, and had gone down to the odd meeting. I went down and became a delegate all right. I was there from the late '60s till we left in the early '80s. During that time I chaired the Labour Council and Civic Affairs Committee. One of the members was Walter Doskoch. Wally and I worked close together on this Labour Council. Really had a great time working with Wally. We had the same interests in this labour council thing. There were certain projects we wanted to see get done. And Local 48 was a good organization. They were giving us the flexibility. Good organization to work with. ?? was a good association for that matter. Local 48, it was a good organization and let you have a bit of freedom. Politics were hard in those days to bring up and discuss at a union meeting. But it got done in some ways. We brought a lot back to the meetings, Wally and I, and kicked around at union meetings. Gradually the membership became more and more. A family at that time had run for New Democrats in the '71 election, when the Lougheed sweep came in. That brought more political understanding to the local union. But Wally and I decided there were 3 things we'd like to see happen. One was the award system, to have a good ambulance system, and to have the LRT system. We both stayed on that committee for a good part of 12 years. Just about the time we left, and we left because the building trades quit paying their dues to the Canadian Labour Congress in about 1982, so consequently we had to leave the membership of the Labour Council and the Alberta Federation of Labour. But Wally was a great guy to work with, and he had

some sayings. One I recollect was “union dues are your best investment.” It’s true then and I guess it’s still true today. He was an interesting character to work with. And Sam Lee, he was too. Just all kinds that I learned from. My parents, there was no unions where we were at, but my dad worked with other people and started a co-op. I thought that was kind of interesting, showed some interest into the organizing end of things and getting things accomplished on an organized basis. They were influential to quite an extent. I had an uncle who was an organizer for the Woodworkers in BC. He’d come to visit us now and again. We lived in a log house, and our log house was right on the Alaska Highway. The road from Edmonton went through there to Dawson Creek and on up to the Alaska Highway. My dad worked on the Alaska Highway. That’s how he made enough money to buy the place and a boat and get a few mink and get started in the mink farming business. My uncle would come and visit us once in a while. I’d listen to him and my dad talk. In those days those people could tell stories for hours. It was very interesting. I believe he was an organizer for the Woodworkers. Some of the stories he’d tell. That gave me a keen interest into it too. Those were some of the people that influenced me into getting more involved into the trade union movement.

They came about about the same time we were forced to leave the Labour Council. There was a lot of good people to work with. Wally was a key one that I remember. He ran for alderman once and had a lot of fun doing that. Wally was very interested in the Federation of Labour also. I had sat on the executive of the Federation of Labour for 4 or 5 years and chaired one of the first health and safety committees when the Gale Commission came out with their report, and health and safety was starting to become a

major issue in Alberta, as it should've. Wally ran for president of the Federation of Labour. That was a lot of fun.

What I heard is that there was some raiding went on in Quebec by the Quebec Federation of Labour, I believe, of electrical and sheet metal workers. From there the relationship with the building trades and the CLC deteriorated. Eventually they did form their own organization called the Canadian Federation of Labour, which had its struggle too. Didn't really accomplish too much, but it lasted 10 or 15 years. It's now gone, and everybody's back in the CLC. There was always the question of convention delegates and representation at the convention. I guess it's still kind of a contention, but it really got played up then. Between this so-called raiding and convention representation, things like that, that's what I recollect was the major things. Could've been something else I guess, but that's what I heard, was this raiding thing. I don't know if it really happened, but I guess something must've happened in order to precipitate the big move to pull out of the CLC.

That's the contention, is that the construction unions had a fairly large membership. One local union covered a huge area and were only entitled to so many delegates to the convention. Other organizations had many local unions and a delegate from each local union. I don't know if it'll get sorted out. But everybody's back in the CLC now anyway, and it seems to be plugging along. The unfortunate thing is, though, that to get everybody back into the labour councils and the Federation of Labour, that doesn't seem to be so easy. It's very unfortunate in my mind, because I kind of wish we were in. But I

understand when you make that move with a big membership, it's a big cost and you've got to have the will to do it. Maybe sometime that will come down the road. I wish it would. It would be nice to be back in. There's some good things have happened. Local 48 in particular played a big role in it. It was good for the membership; it was a good move for the overall labour movement. It was at least a little bit of participation of the labour movement anyway.

That's probably one of the factors I missed, is that politics was a thing. Some of the unions had said no they'd try to work with whoever was in power. The CLC had taken the position they were going to support the NDP party. It was another one of the bone of contentions when the pullout happened--when they quit paying their per capita.

When I started in 1973, there was very little that wasn't union, even residential to quite an extent; certainly all the commercial work, and certainly all the industrial, and pipelines and all that kind of stuff. One of the jobs I was on, I'd worked up in Fort McMurray area but there was no Suncor; there was a pilot plant. That's what I worked on. There was no bridge across the river from Fort McMurray. There wasn't much. But even that pilot lab was union. We were hired out of the union. A contractor got it and we were hired from the union for this little pilot plant down along the river. That was the forerunner to the Suncor plant now. But even that was union at the time. It was a good time, overall a good environment for working people, in all areas I think. Of course I know the construction industry and building trades best out of it. But there was gas plants being built all over. They were always union. They were great construction jobs for all the trades. They'd last

a few months. You might come back and be on the out-of-work list. A couple months pick up another slip; you knew you had work to go to. It was a good situation for working people. That's why people wanted to get into the trades in those times. It was a good way to make a living. Conditions were reasonably good and wages were keeping up with everything at the time. So everything was pretty well union. That went on till, I suppose that started even in the '50s and went on till very early 1980s. I've talked a bit about some highlights, and there have been some great highlights. I mentioned the 1964 agreement, the 1969. Myself getting elected as a business agent was kind of a highlight. Seeing those things happen at the Labour Council, and those projects we'd worked on so long come to...that was highlights. But as well as highlights, there was certainly...and it was just a great time to be involved in a trade union movement and the union movement, and unions for that matter. When the 1980s came along, the whole world changed. It was a massive change. There was massive unemployment. A couple of things happened in the early '80s that really changed things was there was a thing called Bill 110 which in a sense legalized a contractor could use a spinoff company if they so desired. And the 24 hour lockout-- those things were crippling to a union and to a contractor if they wanted to remain union. So it really started to deteriorate. People were forced to, the saying was you couldn't bend low enough fast enough to get to where this bottom line was. There seemed to be no bottom to this. It just kept spiralling down, and really wasn't a great time. There was other things happening: the non-union, the union of conveniences, various other unions. The non-union was making major gains into where things were almost 100% union, particularly in commercial work and now into large industrial. There's some major non-union and union of convenience evolving into that scenario.

You could say at times it's 70%, maybe more; then at other times it could be down to 30%.

In Alberta we never had great labour legislation anyway for that matter. We relied on the economy to quite an extent to negotiate collective agreements. I'm not sure if it happens in all industries, but it certainly does in the building trades. You rely on the economy to quite an extent to negotiate your agreements because the legislation really isn't there. But up till about that time it wasn't great, but you could live with it. But once these things started happening, the price of oil collapsed, and the economy started to go bad, there was nothing to fall back onto. Governments decided that somehow there was going to be some mechanism so that these employers could take advantage of this well-trained workforce to some extent. There was no legislation to support you. The other provinces had it. They could organize. They didn't allow things like the spin-off or the 24 hour lockout. Consequently their agreements stayed in place. Cuz what happened with the 24 hour lockout, our collective agreement came to an end. And it stayed to an end for quite a few years.

The lack of legislation to protect the union in a way of operating as it normally does to continue to have collective agreements, to continue to do certain things. It was no longer there. It's deteriorated. It's one of the unfortunate things in the history of the building trades, how it's evolved. Right now the boom is on in the tar sands and there's great need for oil throughout the world. The economy seems to be picked up. It's really brought the unions back to quite an extent. These projects are so huge that the non-union can't do

them all. Consequently the union contractors are getting the majority of them. It creates the impression there is a good economy. And there is a good economy, from that perspective while these projects are going.

They've started their spinoffs, particularly in the commercial and institutional type of work. They went to their non-union branches or arms and they're still there. There's been nothing to stop it since. In this province, that scope of work has been done non-union. Some unions have been able to do some organizing. The Plumbers and Pipe Fitters Union still have a reasonable number of contractors who do work in that scope of work, and they are surviving in it. There's been some help for them provided by some things, such as the MERF fund, the Market Enhancement Recovery Funds. That's helped a lot. When a contractor goes to bid a job and they're bidding up against non-union, this fund provides some funding for benefits and make it a little more competitive. They've picked up a bit of work that way, in the commercial scope. So it isn't easy to get there. You've got to have all kinds of things going now to be able to survive.

Their rate of pay is probably a little bit lower. The benefits aren't the same. The safety isn't treated as much as it should be. One of the things it does, the employees don't get the chance to participate as I would like to see us do--where they could hear somebody talk about something that happened at a building trades meeting or a Labour Council meeting. Consequently I think they're losing out on a lot. Some of them belong to organizations where they have to pay dues. The wages aren't the same but they're close. Benefits aren't the same. But it's enough to give them an advantage; there's no doubt about that.

The way they've come to be known as unions of convenience is the Christian Labour Association. That's one of the key ones. There's a contractors association who operate non-union. But they have this association if they have any union at all. They have a benefit plan through that association. It gives the employees some benefits. But in the end I still don't think it's not like belonging to an organization where you can really come down and voice your opinion on certain things and be informed of certain things that are happening in our communities and society. They're the big losers from that perspective.

Looking at it today? Since the spin-offs and stuff started over 20 years ago, it's still in place today. There seems to be some type of move to keep unions held down. It doesn't appear there's anything on the horizon that's going to put us back to where we could have a decent labour legislation where you could organize. Since the new Labor Code came in in 1988, the employer can do many things. They can meet with the employees. You gotta have a vote no matter if you've got 100% signed up. As we've seen, you can have 75% of the people signed up and still lose the vote on that particular day when the vote's taken. It doesn't look too good at this time. There's work right now. A lot of people are working in the construction industry. But there's a big non-union element out there too, and it's not getting any smaller. It seems to be growing if anything. I don't know if it bodes all that well for the future. I think it's really unknown at this time what's going to happen.

Although, in the very near future it doesn't look like things are going to be all that good. It's not going to be back to where we had it prior to 1988 or in the '70s where there was some non-union of course. There always was. But you could go out and have a good

chance at organizing a particular employer if you wanted to. Now there's really not that chance and opportunity.

There certainly was. Once the unemployment hit so bad, there was a group who decided they weren't going to work non-union, no matter what. They decided they were going to put up a pretty good fight. In the mid-'80s in the construction industry there was a group formed. They were rank-and-file people. A few people met and it got bigger and bigger. It got to the point where there was hundreds of them. They could call a meeting and get the major to the meeting, get a minister to a meeting. This group became known as the Dandelions. They put up a really good fight. They became known throughout Canada and North America. They were a really good grassroots organization. During that time it led to some people like the New Democrats getting elected. Business manager of Local 48 was elected as a New Democratic MLA for the City of St. Albert. Never believe that could happen, but it did. Over the years, Local 48 always had the argument against talking a little politics at a meeting. There was always a little bit happened anyway. That in 48 alone led to it. One of the members of 48 ran as a New Democratic candidate in the early '70s. With this grass roots movement called the Dandelions, I think it got them to go as a bloc. That was the key to getting in '86 sixteen NDP MLAs were elected around this area. Some were even from Calgary.

I was still a full-time...[tape ends]