

Ellen Bullock interviewed by: Winston Gereluk, Catherine C. Cole and Don Bouzek on June 24, 2014

EB: My name is Ellen Bullock.

WG: Tell me about your background.

EB: My mother came from Ukraine in Tereshpol, close to Tereshpol. My dad came from Bellerose. My mother came from a peasant family where they used to steal firewood. My dad came from an elite family where he was considered more or less like a judge. That ran in the family from grandfather to great grandfather. If he'd have stayed in the old country that's what he would've been. He was one of the very wisest men I ever knew. But he came to Canada at the age of 19 and my mother came at the age of 19 but 14 years later. So she came. The funny story about all this is she came to Morinville and she got a job as a babysitter or family helper. At that time she figured that French was the national language, so she was learning French. A year later she left the home realizing that it wasn't. She had to start all over again learning English. My dad worked in coal mines; he was a steam engineer, used to work up north. They used to walk half ways to get there. We rented four different homes before I went to school. We finally got, like okay, when I started school, I know this is choppy, but when I started school I didn't know a word of English. I knew that this was number five but at this time this was number five, the thumb itself. We had a neighbour's daughter who took me to school and I had to start learning English. It didn't take long. We were in a predominantly 99 percent Ukrainian community. Everybody spoke Ukrainian. We all wore big bloomers to school and felt socks in winter, and we all walked. We all timed it so the last person would, we'd sort of pick everybody up along the way so we wouldn't get covered by snow if we fell in. We had a country school, one room one to six and then seven to nine, after that two years of correspondence. When I grew up there was no such thing as busing. My sisters five years later were bused to Thorhild. Did I tell you we were born in a community called Waugh? So we were so Ukrainian that we had a teacher, his name was Russell and I forget his first name, he became a Ukrainian translator after he left.

DB: Please don't touch the microphone.

EB: Okay. Anyways like I said, he became a translator. So everybody being Ukrainian was very nice. The people were poor but they got together at least every second week. The men would buy a keg of beer and the women would make sandwiches, and this was their get-togethers. It was wonderful, they helped each other. I remember when my dad, I must've been 11 and my brother must've been about 8-1/2. My dad got blood poisoning because of a rusty cable. He was in the hospital, it was springtime. Us kids had to harness the horses to start seeding. That was part of our life. You grew up on a farm, you did. I was the oldest, so we had to do what we had to do. I remember making haystacks. I had to be on top shaping them out, stooking. I remember a mouse running up my leg. I was hopping around the field screaming my head off. I think the mouse was more scared than I was. From that day on it twines all around my legs. It was just part of our life. I learned how to drive a tractor when I was what, my dad got the tractor when I was 12. Told me what to do. What did I do? Back right into the shed post. The neighbour was there. He says, "Now you're a driver." My dad had a 1928 Chrysler, one of these big tall cars. I started to drive, that's what I drove. ... First car I drove was, like I said, a '28 Chrysler. I remember sucking the gas in because it had to be primed. Also our main entertainment was the hall. They brought in movies. I

remember Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, which we really enjoyed. The hall was almost like steps away. My dad was janitor. At that time he was applying for, we still hadn't got any membership. He was applying for Canadian papers. We had the RCMP show up saying dad was a communist and he couldn't get papers. Dad says, "No, he says, I need money to feed my family, why can't I be a janitor? Is there any reason why I can't work at the hall?" Well they had to go through all this screening and everything to make sure he didn't have a membership. Dad says he was lucky at the time he hadn't got it yet, because he may not be Canadian today. I remember painting the hall and then I did a lot of playacting. They called him ?? in Ukrainian where we used to get together and practice and put on these plays. That was very interesting. I had to learn Ukrainian 'cause my mother wouldn't, she'd read the smaller parts and then she'd say, "If you take bigger parts you'll learn it yourself." So I learned Ukrainian. One part ran into 90 pages. Then what else can I say. We lived a different life altogether than the kids to today. I was 13 years old when I was babysitting, not babysitting, looking after kids for a week or two weeks at a time where the parents were away. I remember feeding a thrashing crew at the age of 12. The sister of the lady that was in the household was supposed to put on the dinner, and she put the chicken on with the guts in. So they got me to go and mum told me what to do. My mother used to be a cook; she used to cook for weddings and funerals. So I learned to look after the family while she was out. My dad did things like prepare people for funerals, because we didn't have the conveniences we have today. So he'd shave them and clean them up and give them a haircut. He used to give all the boys a haircut, and he was a shoemaker. He was into everything. We grew up in a very loving, caring home. My kids call us the Waltons. I had a brother who was 2-1/2 years younger, and twin sisters. Something that I don't know if people will be interested in this, but my mother had her tubes tied when she had the twins, which was unheard of in those days. But the doctor did it for her, so she only had the four of us. We used to have a great big garden. I remember the RCMP coming out to the house and telling us that we weren't allowed to grow poppies in rows, they had to be scattered throughout the garden. Mum says, "Why?" "Because the airplanes flew by and they found them and raided them." So that's the way we planted our poppies. When I grew older I found out my dad made moonshine for two years. Not for sale, it was just strictly for home use. He used to bury it under the trees. We didn't believe that he was a moonshiner, but I guess that was life then wasn't it? My mum used to poach fish. We grew up on the Redwater River and she put a box on the beaver damn and the fish would fall in. They tell us now it was illegal; she didn't know it. The other story is Kelly and the neighbour's boy getting caught fishing in my mum's farm, mom and dad's farm, and they got tickets. She couldn't believe that you would have to get a ticket on a farm. It's my land. It was funny. I think the boys got away with that.

WG: So you were raised as a worker, like so many Ukrainian children.

EB: Oh definitely.

WG: When you left the farm, did you leave to go to work or did you leave to go to school?

EB: No, I left to work. We didn't have the money. In fact, I had to help my parents get, I remember the first year that I bought my sisters watches and I bought my mother a silver set. She didn't have china.

WG: What kind of work did you come to do?

EB: At the farm what we did was more like feeding chickens and cleaning the barns and cows, bringing them in. I used to love lightning storms, sitting out in the yard. I remember dad standing in the yard saying, "This is so wonderful, it's mine." He said, "If I was in the old country it wouldn't be." He says, "This is beautiful, I own this." So he was a very proud Canadian. What else did I do? Like I said, I can remember going out looking after, just a couple of times I had to go out and act as a, I don't know what you'd call it, a maid? Looking after the kids. Then when I was 17 I went to Morinville. I spent a year helping a family friend with a café, like working as a waitress or whatever.

WG: Then you went to Edmonton?

EB: Yes, no, yes. I came to Edmonton and worked for a family. She was having a rough time so I was sort of like it would be helper. We worked together more or less. I was with her for about nine months, then I went back home again, it was just sort of. Then when I came in I must've been about 18 and I came into, I worked for a Chinese grocery store. That was very, very interesting because we had the horse meat market next door, the fish meat market on one side and the horse meat market on the other side. We were the only ones that had chocolate bars and candies, so they were always over. I remember the first time the guy came in from the horse market we started to tease him about bringing us horse garlic sausage. One day he walks in with a big string, and do you think we could eat it? It was just something that we weren't used to, but we finally took a taste. We were right behind Woodward's downtown. A close friend of mine said, "Burns is just looking for people at this moment and they're paying higher wages than anybody else; get there now." Which I did. I took some evening classes to be able to work in the office. The wages were just too good to leave. It seems that they were good to us. We worked hard, I know that, but I started how do you put it, I worked with the management. We had a management and a union or a setup where we worked together to work out issues. So that was one part of my job. At that time it was hard to get people. One thing I remember is if you got pregnant you had to quit. I was the second one. The first one, her name was Stella. We won the case. Well it wasn't that we did but they won the case that we could come back to work after pregnancy. They gave us three months leave of absence – a month and a half before and a month and a half after. It's not like they get today. So I was the second one at Burns to get that leave, and I went back after. I worked there till 1965 and I quit. After that we went out of town for about a year. Things didn't work out. We came back and shortly after that I was separated, left on my own with three children. I went and applied at Burns to see if they'd take me back. They said, "No, because I was too old at that time." So fine. But I went to see some of the foremen that I had before and they said, "Oh they guys will take you on." So I got on like this but I had to remember there was a union. So the first year, shortly after I got put on nights, with three children at home by yourself, how do you go on nights? So I started hounding the office. The assistant manager was super and he said, "I've got something for you. You'll have to go into pork cutting, which is dominated by males." He says, "I've got two young ladies to go with you." So fine, that gave me days, I'll go, and it put me in a higher labour grade. But I hate to say this, men at that time were chauvinistic, and a few of them were really chauvinist pigs. They didn't want women there, and one of the reasons was that we could outwork them. I came home crying more than once. It wasn't all; it was just a few that seemed to resent that. So finally I remember the nurse telling me, she says, "Stick to it, don't let them get to you." I says, "But how do you fight back when you're fighting back 60 of them and there's just three of us?" She said, "Show them what you can do." So we did stick it out. That year the election came up for Secretary and

the chap they had they disliked. So two weeks before the election they came up to me and asked me to run for Secretary. I said "no" because I knew I didn't have a chance, because women weren't involved. So they said, "Try it." So I stood for Secretary and sure enough I got 85 percent of the vote. Not because of who I was, because they disliked the fellow that was running. But after that I was Secretary until Burns closed; I think it was eight or nine years. But what really got me is when I got elected Secretary the other plants or how would you put it, the main, like Canada Packers, Swifts and all the guys told us "What in the world were we doing in there, we should be at home watching our kids." They did not want women in there. So we were ostracized again because we got into something we shouldn't have. So there again I was told, "Stick to your guns." So I did. Like I said, there were times when it got rough. One thing that I didn't like about the union at that time was representing lazy people. We got people that used to come in with backaches the same time every year, and you knew that they weren't suffering from backaches. But what could you do? You had to represent them. That was the hard part, I guess because I was brought up a worker and we had to commit ourselves to that, and a lot of these people did not. I went to Calgary on the conventions and everything, it wasn't bad. Then when they closed up I went on the worksite. There was a committee called the Company and Union Combined, and I was the Secretary. So when they closed I was one of the last ones there, so I took over for two months working with UIC and with the packinghouses and with different firms trying to get the people jobs, seeing what they can do, where I can get them a job. So we placed a lot of people, we got people on unemployment insurance. I had the agent come in from Calgary to give me a hand. One of the managers from UIC used to come in at least twice a week, so I had a lot of help while I was there. They talked me into taking retail meat cutting at NAIT, which I did. Then I didn't know what I was going to do after that. I could've gone to Calgary but my children decided no, they've got a home here, they love it here. Thank God they closed four years later.

WG: The work you did in the plant on the line – what was it like? Was it hard or easy, and were there hazards?

EB: I'll have to go back to... The work we did at the packinghouse, it's hard to explain. It wasn't really hard and it could've been hard, depends who you were. When I first started there was no automation. The wieners came on racks and we had to cut them, bring them down on the table, cut them, and then pack them. After that, years later they came out with all these automatic machines where we didn't have to do these things. A lot of people were laid off because of machines. It's surprising how many people could be laid off because of one machine. So then I went after I worked with the wieners and stuff like that, with the lunch meats, we used to have to, they put them in to cut them up. We didn't have the plastics then that we have today so it was a little different. It's hard to describe that. Then I went into, it was a time when they didn't have, they couldn't get the men to use knives. Anybody who could use a knife, they were after. I was one of them. I did not want to go on a knife for the simple reason you were tied to one spot. So I took a split labour grade and I did work on a knife for so many hours, and so many hours in the plant as a clerk or whatever, which was easier. The average person, like today if you put them in there they'd be gone within two days. They wouldn't handle that. I know some used to come in and "Oh my gosh, do we have to do this?" I think a lot of us, maybe because we were raised on the farm, it didn't seem that way. I know one of the reasons I was in there was for money. At that time, 1931, CNR and the packinghouses were the top wages in Canada. In the 1960s going into '70s they were in the 75

or 80th place in wages; it changed that badly. But it was still better for me than going anyplace else. But then when I went back, when I went into pork cutting, I was fortunate because I got into a clerking job where I was working with making sure that the orders were going to the right places. You're getting big boxes, making them up, and shipping stuff to BC, and on the stops, wherever the truck stopped, make sure that they followed in order. Then when I finished that I had to go on the line. We did what we could. But the sad part came in a year later. They decided they would change the system. Anybody who worked in pork cutting had to go on the killing floor. So would you go back and go? In my case I had to go back to afternoons because of the union, or quit, because of the children. So the longest walk in my life was the four stairs up to the killing floor. What would I do? I went. My job was working with pancreas, pulling pancreas and putting them in a pail and shipping them to Red Deer for diabetic treatment. So I stayed there. Working with the inspectors, it was great. At first it was very hard but then after that it was simple. Then the company approached me and they wanted me to be safety supervisor. I don't know why I ever did that, because anything that happened, you know if the guy fell asleep taking hogs, you have to be there. He just dozed off. I'll tell you a funny story. We had a cute guy who worked with us, he was black. We called him JJ. One day he comes up to us and he says, "I've got a unique way of chasing hogs up the ramp, the sows especially," the guy says. "Well, how do you do it?" He says, "I kick them in the nuts." We laughed for a month after. He was so funny. They couldn't get guys. I remember the year they brought in all these young fellows and they were all what do you call it, all on dope. Because where I worked my desk was next to the roof where they could walk out on the roof, they used to walk past me and half the time I knew what they were doing but what can you do? This one guy he said he had to have it about every two hours or he couldn't work. So it was a lot of fun there, working with these. To come back to when I first got in there, what happened was the fact that because they didn't like us being there at the beginning right, and they had refused to do overtime. But I was not in the department in the time, I was in another department and they asked for overtime and I stayed. I didn't know what they were doing upstairs. Well when I got back upstairs they came down on me, on this bionic woman. Boy did I ever get a hard time. So anyways, anytime anybody said bionic woman... behind me was where they kept the boxes and hid their lunch there. I'd take something from their lunch boxes. Finally they had to stop because I kept it up for at least a month until they quit that. Then they said, "Well, you didn't eat all that." I says, "No, I have a little box where..." But it worked. But it was just I found all the way through it was bucking not the system so much as your own employees, especially the male. I remember we had, oh she used to be a Member of Parliament, she worked with us in the laundry. Do you think I can think of her name now? Then a year later I talked a friend of mine into coming into the union, and she became the treasurer [CCC: Dolly L'hirondelle.] So it was better for me, because there were two of us. Then what we did, we went after what the company was doing at that time. They'd pay your insurance if you were single but if you were married, it didn't make a difference if your husband had insurance or not, they would not cover you. So we had to go to human resources and we had to fight that one. We got static from the union as well, but we went ahead and fought it and we won. So after that the women that did have husbands that didn't have insurance were covered. But they would only cover you if you were single, otherwise if you were married that was it. So those days were different.

CCC: You mentioned the first period you worked there you ended in '65. When did you start that first time? How many years were you there the first time?

EB: I started there in '61.

CCC: Then you had a break of a few years and then you came back?

EB: I came back about four years later, four or five years later I think.

CCC: So about '69. Then when did you end there?

EB: Pardon me?

CCC: When did you end there?

EB: When the plant closed. If you ask me the year, I don't remember. [CCC: 1980 closed meatpacking operation, became distribution centre]

CCC: Sounds like you had a large variety of jobs at the plant. Was that usual?

EB: Depends who you were. Depends if you were, if they needed somebody, would I be bragging if I say I was capable of doing almost anything? So if they needed somebody, I was there. I can honestly say I worked in almost every department, including the kill.

CCC: Were certain jobs more likely to be done by women or by men?

EB: Yes. But there came a time when they couldn't get enough men. For some reason, men were not capable with knives, trimming meats or cutting meats and stuff like that. I personally refused that because it was standing in one place. I loved moving around. If you were put, how do you put it, if you stood in one place all day seven days or five days a week, you'd go crazy. But if you had a chance to work here and go there, your life became interesting.

CCC: Working in all of the different departments you must have gotten to know a lot of people in the plant, which I assume helped you in your union work.

EB: I don't know. Can you ask that one again?

CCC: Did it help you in your work with the union that you knew so many people in different departments?

EB: It may have, it may have, especially at the end. Oh I forgot to mention when we had a strike it helped because we had to issue cheques. Having to write the cheques out and putting in the hours they put on the picket lines, knowing all these people was a benefit. That could've been a real headache, because we worked out of a trailer on the grounds. I forget how long we were on strike but it was a little while. We had to walk the picket lines too, but I worked more out of the trailer than the picket lines.

CCC: So you were doing administrative work with the union at that point?

EB: Yeah.

CCC: You talked about removing the pancreases and sending them away for people with diabetes. Were there other parts of the animals that were used in different ways?

EB: At the packinghouse everything was used except the squill. They couldn't use the squill but they used everything else. The really, really bad stuff all went into fertilizer. But then they used to collect the water and that used to go into soap, like the grease used to gather. Everything was used, the skin. The head, the head was used for head cheese. They used to cut out the cheeks for head cheese. There wasn't anything. The feet were used for head cheese too. The Ukrainians bought them up by the bushels, and they loved it. So I think just about everything was used.

Q: Were most of the bits and pieces processed at the plant?

EB: Mmmm.

CCC: What about the tanning and rendering and those kinds of things?

EB: It was all done at the plant. The lard was rendered there. We packaged the lard, we packaged what else? It's such a long time, I'm forgetting. We had the egg rating too, so we had just about everything. A lot of the stuff went into feed, so we had a feed mill. Our main customers were the Hutterites. They used to come in all the time.

CCC: To buy feed?

EB: Well they'd buy feed but they'd also go through the plant and buy other stuff. But they were mostly interested in the feed mill.

CCC: Was there a shop at the plant where anybody could come?

EB: Not really, no. It was more wholesale.

CCC: So the Hutterites were buying enough...

EB: They were a colony where they could classify as what you'd call a shop or whatever. They used to buy enough where they could be a store.

CCC: Could employees shop at the plant?

EB: Oh yes, oh yes. We had what they called plant market, and that was once a week. We were very fortunate because when they put, especially with lunch meat, they'd big casings. If they split they were perfectly good but they would split so they'd sell them to us half price. If a ham fell off and fell on the floor we were able to buy it half price. So we got real good treats like that. Our family may have been poor but we were never without meat, so that was a nice part about it. Every Friday we were allowed to buy whatever we wanted. If we bought for that first line stuff we still got about 20 or 25 percent off. But stuff that, like I said hams that fell or split casings, we got them at 50 percent.

CCC: Having grown up on the farm, did you continue to garden in the city?

EB: Yes, I had a garden out on the government tree farm with my daughter. My son-in-law worked for the Abbotsfield Youth Centre and the Chileans had a – I forget the name of their group – and we got in with the group and we got a great big garden at the government tree farms. So we were lucky. We got all our vegetables. It was under lock and key until last year. I told my daughter, we should bring the tomatoes in. We had 60 tomato plants, and we didn't bring them in. So the following Saturday we went

out, there was not one left. Plants and tomatoes were gone. Carrots were gone, almost everything. How they got in there we'll never know. But it wasn't only us; a lot of us lost our stuff. So after that year we didn't go back. It was sad.

CCC: What about social activities at the plant? Were there clubs or tournaments or dances?

EB: When I left we did have, I was involved with the social committee for years. We always put on union dances. But when I left, somehow in that interim they had rented a hall and somebody got really drunk and tore the toilet off the wall and made a real mess. After that they just didn't bother. I remember coming back, the year I came back, it must've been September. Everybody says, "We need a Christmas dance." I said, "How are you gonna put it on? Where are you gonna get a hall? Where are you gonna get an orchestra?" Somebody gets the hall, somebody gets the orchestra. We hired a cook from the Royal Alec, and he buys us all the stuff for the do. We came out with 38 cents at the end of the do. So from then on every year we had a real nice do and we never went broke, nobody was ever fighting again. We made sure it was. And they had bowling, we had a bowling league. I remember they had a curling league. I curled with them a few times but I was into bowling. The men went golfing, they had golfing as well. The company was good with us.

CCC: Did you play against people who worked at the other plants, or who did you play against?

EB: No, we didn't.

CCC: Just different departments within the company?

EB: No, I don't remember getting together with...

CCC: But when you were bowling, who did you bowl against?

EB: Whoever was bowling in that league. The leagues, see Burns had a league, Safeway had a league. A lot of companies had leagues, so the bowling alley, for example like we had a bowling alley right here where Toys R Us is now. I bowled for Safeway. But whoever gets in there bowls against who is in there. So when Burns got into this league I don't remember who we bowled against but I remember when we got in with my husband at the time, we were married, at the implement, that was strictly wholesale implements. They weren't individuals. [Aside to Winston: You're looking at the pictures. I was going to say, the oil paints, I did a lot of oil painting.]

CCC: That's your own work?

EB: Yeah, the oil painting, yeah.

CCC: You mentioned being on strike. Do you remember why you went out on strike or what the issues were at that time?

EB: Same issues as always – wages, mostly wages. Seniority, wages, the usual.

CCC: But when you had the issue over benefits, you didn't have to go on strike for that one.

EB: Benefits, if I remember right there was a benefit involved but I'm not sure which one it was. We did have a benefit involved, but it's going back so far that I really don't remember. I knew wages was one of them, and it seemed to me that we lost more than we gained.

CCC: What was it like being on strike on the picket line?

EB: It was hard. You were getting what you call strike pay but it wasn't what, never compared to what working was. Like I said, I feel we lost a lot during the strike.

CCC: Did it impact relationships between workers or between the workers and management afterwards?

EB: No, everything was fine. Somehow the strike then was civilized. It wasn't like when Pocklington came in. When he brought the strikebreaker from the States, he played dirty ball. I remember working at Deli Flavour at the time and we had three young men who were really ambitious and they worked both places. They said, "Oh look at all the money we're making." So I worked with the scabs. But we didn't have a union at that time. After I went to NAIT I went back to the meat industry. Two of the management ended up in the same place I did, so the minute I applied I got the job.

CCC: What was the name of that company?

EB: It had about five different names. It started off with Deli Flavour then it went to Woodward's and then it went to I don't remember. It ended up with Fletchers and then Grimms and then finally closed as Grimms.

CCC: Where was it located?

EB: It was located... [Aside to her son: Kelly, where was Grimm's located? It was in that area....
Response: by the old SPCA]

CCC: What was that community like in terms of the number of meatpacking and related industries that were there?

EB: My opinion was we were all the same, we never fought between each other. We didn't get really close with each other. I knew a lot of people from Packers and I knew a lot of people from Swifts. We were close friends but as far as that goes we were from Burns and they were from Swifts and they were from Packers. My brother-in-law worked for Packers.

CCC: Did you get the impression that the operations were fairly similar between the plants?

EB: Oh yeah, definitely. You can only make a wiener one way. I remember hearing these stories coming out, especially bologna. Oh don't eat it, because they put all these returns in it, that's all garbage. It's all returned stuff. You listen to these people talk about it and you think to yourself, "Why don't you chuck it out?" What does go into bologna? It's stuff that is not suitable for steaks. They won't put a steak in bologna but they'll use it as a steak. But what do they do with meat that cannot be used as a steak? It goes into wieners, into lunch meat, into bologna. They're allowed to put 10 percent. Inspectors check, say if you get returns that come back, the inspectors will let you put in 10 percent if it's good, otherwise no, just all fresh meat. So basically they were all the same. They were selling the same products and

doing the same work. A lot of our people went to Swifts, not very many to Packers, and a few went to Gainers then later came back to Swifts, then it was closed.

CCC: How many people worked at Burns when you were there?

EB: If I remember right it was 420, over 400.

CCC: But dispersed over quite a few operations in different buildings and departments.

EB: Oh yeah. The reason why they closed Burns is because they diversified. After Patty Burns died Childs took over and they must've had about 35 different subsidiaries like where they which were making money and at that time Burns wasn't making money. Instead of putting, they were not putting the money back into the company but they were putting the money into different areas like they were buying different places they shouldn't have been. Then they finally decided they'd spend money at Burns, and I remember watching this. They put in this big freezer and railing system, over \$1 million. A year later they closed.

CCC: That seems odd to me.

EB: They just didn't want to put the money into it. We had a chap there, Bob McCrimmon, he was really great, hay wire bubble gum, the whole place was hay wire and bubble gum. If they'd have put in the proper, did the proper maintenance when they should have instead of coming back 20 years later and spending \$1 million on something that, somehow or other there was no common sense. I know I shouldn't be saying all this but...

CCC: They also made a decision to split the beef and hog processing somewhere along the line.

EB: Well they still had the beef kill and the hog kill.

CCC: Right to the end?

EB: Do I remember that or do I? No, I don't think they did. But there was money in the hog kill, which went to Fletchers in Red Deer and they made big money. But they slowly phased out, I don't know. I know why Burns closed, it was just that they were putting money in the wrong place.

CCC: What's the bubble gum you mentioned?

EB: Yeah, bubble gum is right. If something broke down it was fixed with, they patched stuff with bubble gum. They were wearing out. This machine would wear out, this machine would wear out, this rail would come down, that rail would come down. If that had been looked after when it was broken, it would've been fine. But when you're looking at a place that's almost half broken down and these guys are trying to fix it with hay wire, with bubble gum, it's not gonna work. Then the million dollars they did spend, they put in a blast freezer which they really needed. But the system was just too much.

CCC: Where did the workers in the plant come from?

EB: To start off we were mostly from Alberta, from all over. But later on we had Chileans, we had a lot of Chileans working for us. What other? Italians. First we got Italians then we got Chileans. We had a lot of different nationalities. As they came in, where their countries had problems they brought them in.

Hungarians. Immigrants that would come in, Burns would employ them. Then after that they hired a whole bunch of junkies or dopies, whatever you call them. They were young people. We asked one guy, he had different socks and he says, "Oh yeah, I got another pair like that at home." We had about nine of them they hired at the same time. They turned out to be good workers but they had to have their...

CCC: Did most of the people from different places get along alright?

EB: Oh yeah. There were a few that would, we had one Ukrainian that used the syrup and a couple of Italians that were. But as a rule the rest were pretty good.

DB: You mentioned the chauvinism you experienced in the plant. Did that improve over the years?

EB: Oh yeah. I had to fight. When I went to NAIT I faced the same thing. First thing was, "What the hell are you doing here?" It's all male. I was the eighth female at NAIT taking retail meat cutting. We had to lift a quarter of beef on the rail and take it down. If you know what you're doing it's not hard. You have to know what you're doing. The lady before me was, what do you call it, one of these that "I'm female." She pushed the issue. So when I got in it was a little hard. I went in because I wanted to be a meat inspector. I passed and I was ready to go in and then I said to myself, "Do I wanna be on the killing floors for four or five years?" 'Cause that's where they put you. I said, "No." That's when I went back to Safeway. I was going to go to Safeway. They refused to take me, not refused, they said, "Why?" Well they were unionized and they ? comes in by the box load, and because you're union you have to be the one to do your share of taking off boxcars. So, no. So when I finished at Burns I did have my choice of jobs but a lot of them no, I didn't want to go into being a meat inspector. But guys, when I go back some of these young guys were quite interesting that took the class with me. A strange thing happened. I went into the class, we were doing, we were supposed to clean, you know..., and my front fell on the floor. The instructor wasn't in the classroom. The boys quickly jumped up and put it on the table and they helped me clean it up. They were so sweet about it, and I don't know if that teacher ever found out what happened. But from that day on they were really nice. But at first it was, "You shouldn't be here." Well I says, "Where are you gonna get the money? Who's gonna pay for your home? If you're self-supporting you need the money." But it seemed every place I went it was always... Now it's a different story. Women get away with murder, they do. But when we were growing up there was no such thing.

WG: I wanted to ask a bit about the ULFTA and your association with the hall. How and why did you become involved with that hall on 97th Street, and what did you think about it? Just a few thoughts.

EB: Oh a few thoughts. It was one of the places my grandchildren – my daughter put my grandchildren into Ukrainian dancing. My grandson was in Ukrainian dancing. My grandson was a brat I'll have to be honest. He loves it and my granddaughter loves it too, so the kids were in there for the longest time. I joined the choir and helped them out with different things. I stayed with them and I'm still with them. It was a wonderful thing. They were so good. They didn't charge – most of the Ukrainian dancing schools, they were charging a fortune. With the hall they were so reasonable and the kids were getting real good, they were really learning. My granddaughter was doing really well. So this is how we got involved. I remember it was interesting because we went with the choir to Regina, we went to Calgary. I never did go to Vancouver but we did a lot of wonderful things. I enjoyed the choir. Too bad my throat went.

WG: There were a lot of politics in the hall.

EB: There still is.

WG: What did you think of that?

EB: I thought it was foolish – really, really foolish. There were a few people in my estimation, I'm not gonna name names, but they went overboard. They shouldn't have because how many times have I mentioned this and I'll say it again and again. What were we doing? We were helping bring up a bunch of children so they knew their heritage. When they started fighting each other the kids lost out. We didn't lose out because we had other places to go, but the kids really lost out. I know my grandson did. They should've stayed, but you get that. I'm in a Community League right now, we're having the same thing. I don't know what it is, power corrupts. It goes to your head, to people's heads. Once you find that, something happens. What are you trying to do? You're trying to help the community or help, to me it was children. I don't know if you ever went to a concert or watched them on stage, they were the most beautiful things. The attorney general came from Alberta to the one in Sherwood Park and she said she never saw anything so beautiful as the little children performing. It seems that anybody that came as a visitor always said the same thing. The kids really outperformed everybody. That is one of the big reasons why I stayed with them and like I said I'm still with them to this day. I love working my bingos too; I work bingos for them. I don't do casinos 'cause it's just too long and too much.

WG: Just for the record, we're talking about branch #2 of the Association of United Ukrainians of Canada. I just wanted to put that into the record.

EB: Then again they started, you know the mother organization, there was a lot of trouble there that shouldn't have been, like the head organization. There again it's power. They were going for power and it destroys. But if people work together as a group and look at each other and work together you'd go such a long way. But if you're out to stab your neighbour, where do you get?

DB: I always thought of the Packingtown area as an area where Ukrainians settled into. Was it largely Ukrainians? How well did they get along together, and how well did they get along with the other ethnic groups?

EB: You know when we first started, we had no choice. The Ukrainians were really put down. We were called 'bohunks', in other words we had a piece of garlic in one hand and a piece of bread in the other hand, so we were 'bohunks'. The Ukrainians, a lot of the Ukrainians went and changed their names. We called them Smoky Lake Irishmen. They didn't want Ukrainian names because they became Irish or English or whatever. If you look, there's a lot of Smiths and O'Reillys that were Ukrainian but they thought they'd get ahead if they changed their name. That's because we were put down and we had to prove ourselves. I think we did in the long run. But I remember at first, I knew a family, I mean this is just, I don't know them that well, but they were Tuponinski and now they're Tups. Which name is nicer?

DB: You mentioned that you won maternity benefits. Was it won through a grievance or a court case, or how did you get maternity benefits extended?

EB: Oh we had to go through a court case.

DB: Just describe what you went through.

EB: We had to go through human relations. I remember her first name was Jan. We had to take it up with the union as a grievance and then we had to go to arbitration. They ruled in our case.

DB: So what did you get?

EB: We got at that time, I hope I'm talking about the right case. I'm talking about the, I'm talking about the benefits.

DB: Maternity benefits?

EB: Oh no. Sorry, I'm talking about the wrong thing. I'm talking about the benefits that were given to the husbands where the husbands were present. As far as the maternity benefits, I wasn't involved in that at all. It came when I first started. Like I said, I was the second one, so it must've come down the line from another packinghouse. I wasn't involved in that one. The one that we were involved was the one with the benefits.

DB: So if one packinghouse negotiated something then then...

EB: Yes, the others would have to pick it up. It was always done that way. So we hoped that somebody else would take the bull by the horns before we did. But because the benefits aren't better in one place than the other, where are you gonna go? So therefore each company tried to stay. If the president of the union found out that we won this, the one at Packers found that out, he'd sure push it.

Q: What were the differences in work conditions between the different parts of the plant?

EB: To start off with, when I was doing clerking we used to have a, like the train would come in and they'd load the cars. I sat right next just about with the door open in the winter a lot of the time. I had to fleece line, not fleece line, they had special underwear and special, they supplied us with that freezer coats. Then the blast freezer, people could go in there 20 minutes, 40 minutes at the most. It was cold. We used to take stuff in there, like returns, reworked stuff. When you walk in you have to have a freezer coat, no two ways about it. They didn't send you from a real warm place to a real cold place, but there were places where it was cold and you knew it was cold. Then you went up on the killing floor, it's scalding. They use scalding water for vats to drop animals. The pigs used to be dropped into scalding tanks, and it's warm. They used to give the guys salt pills, not all of them; I never took any.

DB: Living in the community when you were growing up, were there coffee houses and places where people would meet and talk?

EB: Nope, nothing. We had a school, we had a hall. That's why I said, the hall was the important thing for us and that was about it. We had the church, the school, the hall. There was nothing else. There was no coffee shop, no movie house, nothing like that. And we didn't have vehicles at that time until we grew up. Later on as teens we had vehicles; we could go out to dances and stuff like that, neighbouring villages. But when I grew up there was nothing.

DB: When you were in north Edmonton did you live in the area around the plants?

EB: Yeah when I first moved in the city I lived on, yeah, 82nd Street, yeah 82nd Street and just off 18th Avenue. That was close to Burns.

DB: Were there places in the community where people meet?

EB: Oh yeah, it became a totally different environment. I worked in a café and worked at the plant – I was stupid enough to do two jobs at the same time. I got off work and then I worked as a waitress and as a night cook over at the café right close to where I lived. They wanted me to quit and stay steady and I said, “No.” But it was Christmas presents for my sisters, for the family. My brother and myself, we all thought of each other to help each other. It was such a different world, not like today.

DB: Did the café have a lot of Ukrainian clientele?

EB: Oh yeah, there was Ukrainian people in this area. More in North Edmonton around the Transit, there were a lot of Ukrainians over there. This area where we are now is more policemen, firemen – this is a fireman's community. We bought the house in '59 and we were the last row of houses. We used to call across the avenue Paperdale, there was nothing but blowing papers. Now we go all the way up to Namao. We were told, we got the report through the Community League, 128th Avenue and that was inner city. So we're a block and a half off inner city. Right now with the Community League we're facing setting up social services as well as police services; all that is coming into effect. Emergency teams are being set up because we're in an area where crime is beginning. It's funny how it changes. We used to be one of the nicest areas, now we're, not that we're slums, but we're getting there.

WG: Most of the Ukrainians I know have an emotional attachment to what's happening in Ukraine, and that affected the politics in the hall. Were you ever part of that? Did you feel that you wanted to talk about the Ukraine and what was happening there?

EB: Personally we'd lost contact. We used to get letters. The last letter from Ukraine from my aunt, she was saying that she was very unhappy because she felt that there was a lot of corruption. The police had taken over. She said she loved the system before that because the system before that they all had a job, even if it was sweeping the street or standing on the corner selling tomatoes or whatever. She says, “We all had something to do, we were proud.” “Now,” she says, “we're not.” She says, “It's all the police are corrupt.” I think about that at times. What we had, like mum and dad lived out on the farm. They weren't poor, they weren't rich. They had a very comfortable life. We were pressured to bring in a young couple. They didn't have jobs and mum and dad weren't prepared for it, they couldn't do it. So they kind of felt that, they wanted mum to buy them a car or send them enough money to buy a car. They seemed to think that we were loaded. When my brother and sisters went for a visit it seems like they said all it was was they were money hungry. She says, they know they're not doing well but they seem to see a different picture of what we are. “Well, certainly one of us could take somebody in.” Well I was a single parent; my sister was a single parent. None of us had the money. They don't realize that we're living on a fixed income, well not fixed, but almost fixed. To try to bring somebody in and to look after them is hard. So that made it a little harder for us, but we did send them clothing and we shipped a lot of stuff over. We used to see the clothing and wedding pictures and stuff like that.

WG: Did you ever feel you were put down? You mentioned being discriminated against because of being a woman, at least at first. Were you discriminated against in the union or in the plant because you were Ukrainian?

EB: No.

WG: When you took the union job was it suggested that maybe a Ukrainian shouldn't be in a leadership position?

EB: No. Don't forget I'm only Ukrainian by being Ukrainian, I was born Ukrainian, my name was not Ukrainian. I keep telling everybody I've got the nicest Ukrainian name.

DB: Can you talk about any of the songs that were sung as part of the choir?

EB: That is something that I've really forgot most of them. The one that I was singing the other day was, oh do you think I can think of it? I've got a book of all of them but I'm trying to think. I'm starting to forget a lot of things. Even with the singing, I'm starting to forget the songs.

CCC: Was there any music in the plant?

EB: We used to sing at home. We had an old what do you call it, we had a guitar and a mandolin. What we used to do is when we had the plays we used to sing between changes of scenes. But we used to sing English songs. But this was Ukrainian, we sang Ukrainian, I'm trying to think of some.

[END]