

Vincent Albert Venne

Interviewer: Muriel & Don

Camera: Don Bouzek

Q: Where have you worked throughout your working life?

VV: Oh I've worked numerous constructions sites all across Alberta and throughout Canada – chemical plants, gas plants, you name it.

Q: What was your first job and how did you get it?

VV: My first job would be 1981 at Sherritt Gordon here in Fort Saskatchewan, and that would be insulating, my first job insulating, and it would be a summer job. I'd still be going to high school because I didn't graduate until the next year.

Q: How did you get that job?

VV: Through my father; my father is an insulator--was an insulator.

Q: Why did you go to work there?

VV: Well it was a good opportunity, a good learning experience, and of course financially it was a well paying job.

Q: Were there many other Indigenous people working there?

VV: A few; not that I can recall. I'm just thinking that in our hall we have a few Métis and Native people. I'm trying to think if I was working with any at that job, but I can't place anyone.

Q: The fact that you're an Indigenous man, was that noticed in the workplace?

VV: Not that I can recall.

Q: Your dad worked there, right?

VV: Yes, actually no, he wasn't working on that job. I was working with, of course a few of his friends, but in them days it was fairly easy to get a son or a daughter onto the job for a first year helper; it was fairly easy. Now it's quite difficult to get someone on the job. It took me some time to get Robert on when I was working at CNRL but I eventually did get him on.

Q: That's your nephew.

VV: My nephew, ya.

Q: Why are they not wanting the relatives to work now?

VV: I didn't see that. It's just because I would say because of all the immigrants that we have coming in now. I would say the employer is a little more wary of what he's going to be getting, even though they have no choice who they get; we have a lot of immigrants in our business now.

Q: Does the union supply the workers to the site?

VV: Yes.

Q: It's been proven that it's good policy to get a family member onsite because they work good, they've got a reason to come to work, and they've got support.

VV: Sure and I would have to say that our union has been an extended family. We've had numerous relatives, like for instance we got Uncle Harold, and I have first cousins in the trade and second cousins in the trade. That's how it used to be when it was more family-oriented. There was always relations. Somebody would marry; interrelations.

Q: You're working in resource-based industries. Did you ever feel conflicted due to the type of work you were doing?

VV: Ya, well we've ripped up a lot of land in our effort to get gasoline. It doesn't seem like they're interested in reclaiming that land in a timely way, because there's still lots of problems there. The one lake that we did talk earlier about up by Cold Lake is they have pumping stations and piping that goes all over the place; it's depressing. One of my favourite lakes is where you can hear the kachunk, kachunk, kachunk of the wells, the pumping stations. You can hear that at night now instead of the quiet.

Q: Did it make it pretty hard for the wildlife to exist?

VV: Ya, I would say.

Q: Was the union concerned about what was happening to the environment?

VV: Not really, no. I don't think that was the union's purpose. Basically it was a hiring hall to get the manpower to the employer, but I don't think that the union had any stance on that at all whatsoever because they're not involved. That would be the main contractors that would be responsible for reclaiming the land and such.

Q: That would verify some of the things that I've heard as an advocate for both the hiring of Indigenous workers and protecting the land. A worker said, no goddam Indian's gonna take my

job. Did you find any of that resistance in your workplace? It sounds like it was pretty good, that everybody knew each other.

VV: Yes, and honestly we didn't care too much about the environment at that time. I did but it's taken a long time for the industry to start reclaiming some of these lands and clean up what they can. I hate to see--I've worked at Suncor a number of times and they're right beside the Athabasca River; they're right beside the river. If there would be any spill there of any great measure, it would destroy a lot of land up to the Fort Chip area. There has been spills and I'm sure that they've just covered them up as best they could. Being that close to the river, that's just scary.

Q: You pretty well know what's going to happen.

VV: Ya, and that seems to be the norm. They need the water system; they need that water source. We have a gas plant right in Edmonton and I have to realize they're right beside the river as well; they're right beside the river. There's so much potential for a bad spill or a fire or explosion.

Q: Were you ever injured on the job?

VV: Yes, and it was something that was hard to prove and there was never any documentation done on it. I was exposed to caustic soda, which is very deadly. It just takes a very small amount to affect you. I was working on a caustic soda line, which wasn't made aware to me. There was a leak on the line and I had worked right up to it and right past it, and in the process I was exposed to this caustic soda. After a few days I couldn't breathe. I could only take very shallow breaths. Of course I recovered but I never went for medical; nothing was ever reported. That's what's happened to a lot of the guys that were exposed to any number of chemicals. They weren't recorded. The company didn't want you to record them, and everything was swept under the rug. Like for today, for now, you can't even spill an old glass of coffee on the ground

without that having an environmental impact. That is a no-no. We're not allowed to spill any coffee onto the ground, which is so funny because they've spilled all kinds of stuff.

Q: But you have to report that?

VV: Ya, paperwork and everything. If I was to spill out my cup of coffee, that would be a recordable incident and I would be possibly subject to a drug test.

Q: But caustic soda is okay.

VV: Caustic soda is fine, ya. And ammonia, there were so many releases. Sherritt Gordon was very bad for that, where they would have these ammonia releases. Ammonia is really bad stuff. It'll knock you down too. I've been exposed to ammonia a number of times.

Q: Have you seen significant changes in the workforce?

VV: Yes.

Q: How did you adjust to the changes?

VV: I would have to say that we've had some positive changes and we've had negative changes as well. I would say the positive changes are we're more aware nowadays of what we're working with, our materials that we're handling. Also it's up to the employer to supply a safe work environment for us, which is very difficult for them sometimes. But I can see improvements in some areas and I can see places where we need improvement, and would be in the training of our young journeymen. There seems to be a new attitude out now that. . . I don't think the young journeymen are getting the proper training. I'd like to see some of them be retrained, not that they're not able to do the work and they're not. I don't know.

Q: Do they do the quality of work that you used to do?

VV: No, I was very disappointed on my last job at the poor quality of work that was given by my members.

Q: Do you attribute this to these six-week wonders?

VV: Ya, I believe that we're not getting trained as well as we should be to get onto the site. This is because of our many immigrants that we have now. Many of them try very hard but some of them don't. I don't know how they're getting into the position they're in.

Q: Are you involved with the union at all?

VV: Not a whole bunch.

Q: Do you go to union meetings?

VV: Not a whole bunch, no. I wish I was more involved but I live two hours out of Edmonton, which restricts me to go to some of these meetings.

Q: What do you see that needs to be changed by the labour unions? In what ways could they be of help to you? Do you think the job stewards and safety officers are effective?

VV: With safety the onus is on you. They've implemented all kinds of safety programs but it doesn't mean anything unless people will adhere to them. On the project I'm on right now they've always touted they want the best safety they can get, but their head safety man was run over by a Diversified bus at the start of the year. One of my fellow insulators has died on the job, where he fell off a ladder and had a heart attack. We don't hear about them things – the

company keeps them out of the news. I know that there was another gentleman that died on the bus. So that's three people that's died on the bus that nobody will hear about.

Q: This could be a real area of improvement, if the union had made that more public.

VV: The way it's geared now, the onus on safety is me and it will be my fault if anything happens. The companies have removed themselves from the situation so they don't become liable in any instance.

Q: It used to be that the employer was responsible, not the worker.

VV: But they've geared that, with their lawyers and with the proper wording, they've geared that to a certain way in which the onus is on the worker. One of the easiest ways that they can get rid of us is with a drug test. Any incident is going to get me a drug test where I will be tested for marijuana and any other kind of drug. That's their easy way out. I've heard stories of guys falling off the tower, and they're fired before they hit the ground.

Q: The whole safety area is a big one. I remember a safety guy telling me you're supposed to wear safety glasses but as soon as they saw the safety guy coming they'd put their glasses on.

VV: Or poke the lenses out and it looks like you've got glasses on. That's a huge thing. We're after our employers for, and I'm sure there is a product out there that will give us fog-free glasses, glasses that won't fog up. If anybody that's worked outside knows, your glasses are going to fog up. As soon as you can't see, you've got a serious safety problem if you're up high or you're. . . This is something that could be fixed by the industry but it won't because it would cost them too much for glasses that would stay clear. I'm sure that there are glasses out there, safety glasses. But instead of getting us these glasses, we're told just to muddle through. Of course you've got to take off your glasses to clean them off as soon as they fog up, and that's where the safety problem comes in. Without sight you can't do nothing. We're supposed to be

hooked up with double lanyards and safety lines. But if you don't have your sight you don't have nothing.

Q: As a Métis man, Indigenous man, working on the job, do you feel that you were treated as good as the other people?

VV: Sure, but my work spoke; my work ethic and my work quality spoke for myself. That's what did the speaking for me. It was never a matter of being Métis or white or black or yellow or green. It's how you did your work.

Q: Are you still working in the trade?

VV: Yes, it'll be 34 years this year in the trade.

Q: I have a question about photographs at the workplace, and I have the big photographs of you.

VV: Which you're not supposed to. No, guys have been fired for that, and putting them on Facebook. Somehow the company will, look this is on Facebook, and they're gone. You're not allowed to post any photos. I don't know what that's for. No one's going to gain any secrets off of that photo, but it's just they don't want anybody taking any pictures at all.

Q: Were there any labour disputes while you were working in the trade?

VV: Sure, I think we've been on strike at least once. We've had a number of labour disputes where I've picketed jobsites, the non-union. That was back when we had a fighting chance; we don't even have a fighting chance anymore.

Q: What do you mean by that?

VV: Non-union is way stronger than they used to be. Used to be 80 percent was union and 20 percent was non-union; now it's basically the other way around – 80 percent is non-union and 20 percent is union.

Q: Tell us about the way they tackled the asbestos. Asbestosis is the big killer in the insulator trades.

VV: It didn't affect only insulators. All this asbestos was there to be exposed to anybody and everybody. If it got damaged it was exposing everybody. If the cladding got damaged and loose, as soon as it becomes friable it's dangerous. We tackled the problem while there was – this is my understanding – we tackled the problem while there was money available for it to be removed. Now I don't hear of any other big removals going on because I don't think they're being funded anymore by the government to get rid of this. We were supposed to have this out of the plants in I think 2002 or something like that; it was quite a while ago that we needed to get this asbestos out of here. But it's still in the plants. In the older plants it's quite common for us to be stripping and all of a sudden realize that we're stripping asbestos, and not being prepared for it. It'll be in the middle of a line somewhere where they didn't necessarily get to it. A lot of the asbestos they would make it inert by encapsulating it, and this was a spray that they used that absorbed into the asbestos and stopped it from being friable, stopped it from breaking down. That was a pretty quick fix – all you gotta do is spray it with some liquid that makes your problem go away pretty quick.

Q: For the record, would you describe your trade, what you do?

VV: Well we do, as a tradesman insulator, we insulate and clad piping, vessels, towers. I've never done commercial so I've never done big buildings or anything like that – all my experience has been in industrial, in factories. That's where the heavier insulations are. Home insulation is

quite safe to work with nowadays. It doesn't have any chemicals or stuff that'll stay in your system like the older heavier insulations that we use.

Q: Hopefully you'll see some improvements with what you've learned and what techniques you're using now. Do you have to wear a mask?

VV: Yes, and we've got new insulations coming out that are not very friendly as well. We have an insulation called Aerogel now that is modern technology. It was designed by the sciences for the space industry, I believe. It's such a perfect insulation – and that's the problem with asbestos – is it was such a good insulation that they didn't look at all the harmful side effects. This Aerogel, if you get any dust on you, water will no longer absorb into your skin. It just beads off your skin, off your face. In your hair, if you get it into your hair, you have to use a can of Coke to get the dust out, a can of pop.

Q: Are there any other points of you being 34 years in the trade that you'd like to record on this special interview?

VV: Well I know that women have made an entrance into our trade, which has its good points and has its bad points as well. I welcomed women into my trade. We've had some very good women that worked for us and we've had some that have not worked so well with us. But, on a general point, I think it's beneficial for us to have women in the trade. In certain areas I think it should be looked at very carefully, based on qualifications. The actual work that I do, it takes dexterity and a lot of hand coordination to do a nice job. Aside from the heavy lifting, there's no reason why a woman can't do that, to do a nice job and work with their hands. It's the lifting, it's the climbing, it's the cold weather like today. Women can't handle that I don't think as much as a man can, the cold weather and the climbing and stuff like that, and lifting.

Q: Some of your work is pretty high up.

VV: Yes absolutely, we work at heights regularly.

Q: What's the role of the union in your workplace?

VV: It seems like my union is more of a hiring hall now than what the union was when I started. I'm not optimistic about the future of my union. I don't think it'll survive, the union will survive the economic pressures that's gonna be put on it. We've already trained, we've had our young apprentices that we've trained through the union have gone non-union. So they benefitted from our experience and now they're just gonna be handing that experience back to the non-union sector. Also our Canadian model with our union, trying to stop the use of marijuana has, we've lost a lot of members to that and they've gone non-union. The union has been losing steadily for some time now and I don't see it bouncing back. The non-union will just gain more power and they'll quash out the union. The job I'm on right now is practically half non-union right now.

Q: When a union doesn't supply the personnel then the company is able to...

VV: Get whoever they want. That's why we've had the problems with these TFW, temporary foreign workers, in the last few years. There was so much work in Alberta that they could not supply the manpower, so that opened the door for the employers to bring in the TFWs. We've brought in Filipinos and Koreans and Chileans, a number of these, and some of them have worked out. We're having more problems with the Somalis now; they have a different work ethic than the rest of our membership, it seems. Some of them are very good but we've got some that it's below them to clean up. For us, cleaning is a big part of our trade, just keeping our mess contained and making sure that it's cleaned up at the end of the job. For a lot of them, that's women's work. So it's above them. We've had trouble with them.

Q: Another factor might be that in their home country they're given advantages and not used to that kind of workforce.

VV: And I understand that they have trouble taking direction from women. They have big trouble. We do have women in foreman positions and even a journeyman woman can tell a helper what needs to be done. So anybody that has a journeyman qualification has the right to tell a helper what to do – a helper or apprentice, anybody that isn't a journeyman. They have trouble taking direction that way as well.

Q: Anything else you'd like to add?

VV: Well it's just that I know that these, the one thing I'd like to stipulate is that our Canadian model and our drug programs, and I really don't think it's done any good for us. If it's anything it's brought people who smoke marijuana recreationally or self-medication, what it's done to them is it's made them look for another form of work. We've lost a lot of our good members just for the simple fact that we have a committee model now that we can't smoke any marijuana and this is affecting us on our own time. So with our new laws coming out this year I'm curious to see if they'll be changing our Canadian model at all.

Q: Is that something which the international union established?

VV: Yes. The Canadian model is what they're striving to attain. This is with the drug testing. But where it's really hurt is their marijuana smokers, because this stays in your system for 30 days. So they're dictating to us what we can do on our own time, and I think it's wrong and it's going to hurt someone down the line.

Q: How does the hiring hall work? Is it structured around seniority?

VV: It's actually on a list. We sign the list when we're out of work and it goes in numerical order, so that when a job comes up we'll take that job whoever's up higher on the list. How it's supposed to work is the longer you're out of work the sooner you're going to get that job opportunity to go back to work. My union is Local 110 Heat and Frost Insulators. It's an

international local, but that's a joke in itself as well because they'll say international but all that means is we send money to United States. What we get back for it is minimal. We get told what to do and we're working under contracts that are dictated by the international, which is not right. I don't think anybody should be dictating when we have a collective agreement that nobody is following anymore. Nobody is working by this collective agreement; we're all working on site agreements by general president's agreement or a site agreement. So our collective bargaining has gone out the window. Every job we go to, it's a different agreement. It has to do with wage, it has to do with hours, it has to do with overtime, transportation. I just got a job offer in Vancouver which doesn't do me any good because they're not supplying any living allowance or travel time. If I'm going to go live in Vancouver I could probably survive on my wages, but ... Or Northern Manitoba. This is supposed to be an international association. Northern Manitoba has work. They have a hydro dam coming up there. They want me to send in a resume, which doesn't make any sense to me. My resume is going to state that I'm an insulator and I've been at it for this many years, and they have that information. I would love to work in BC but in BC it's a hundred percent name hire. We have a list that we sign the books. We work off of that list. In B.C. it's a hundred percent name hire where they actually name hire all their employees. If you don't know anybody, you're not gonna go to work.

Q: That's not a union.

VV: It's not a union. See how our union has fallen apart? Even the hiring hall is not how it was.

Q: How do you think the victims of asbestos were treated? I've seen a letter that says they knew in 1986 that asbestos could permeate your liver, and that's what my brother died of.

VV: Absolutely, they've known about asbestosis for a long time, since the mines in Canada in Ontario and Quebec where they have mine asbestos and still sell it abroad, which doesn't make much sense. We're selling it to Third World countries, which in turn contract asbestosis. With

their minimal safety, we're talking Africa and the Third World countries is where we're selling this asbestos. . . . They've known that since much earlier than that, the miners.

Q: You were there as a young union member and these guys were getting asbestosis and one by one they died.

VV: Yes, most of them are all passed now; all my mentors are all gone.

Q: How many died of asbestosis?

VV: Oh hundreds. I would almost say that most insulators died of cancer caused by asbestos.

Q: When you were growing up, did you have contact with the land?

VV: Not much. I was born in the city here and I didn't get out of the city until I was about 18. But I always wanted to. I spent lots of time with my grandfather in the countryside around Vegreville and stuff like that. But no, as for environment, that was a chosen love, I think.

Q: What is it you like about the environment?

VV: Well it would have to be the freedom Nature always holds. It's mysterious and there's a lot of secrets to be learned from Nature. Nature doesn't give up their secrets very easily . . . Even our environment--now, everybody's got a quad, everybody's got a skidoo.

Q: You were mentioning a lake up near Cold Lake – what was the name of that lake again?

VV: That was ? Lake, and that was my favourite lake. I'd found that hiking when I was hiking in around the Esso projects. The Esso projects were built in the '70s and '80s. I don't believe it's Esso anymore. It was bought out by somebody else. They were all steam injection plants. There

was no open pit mining like they do in Syncrude and Suncor. So it's fairly non-invasive, the steam. But they—we--got all the piping coming in all the way around and joining site to site. I don't know much about the mining process but I know that they have to pump it in one spot, have to pump water in in order to pull it out of another spot. There's a lot to it. Now we have directional drilling and all kinds of stuff. Earthquakes yes, I have felt an earthquake in Alberta up near Fort McKay. I'm not sure whether it was because of mining or what.

Q: I spent some time with the Fort McKay community, and a lot of the issues there were there's supposedly all these warning systems when there's a spill, but they weren't being told or they were being told two weeks later after they'd been using the water.

VV: That seems to be the norm. They won't admit to anything unless they're caught red-handed. With the amount of spills and explosions and fires that I've seen, there's never been anything in the paper the next day. They don't want that to be common knowledge, the mistakes and the problems they have.

Q: I gather your union does its own training.

VV: Actually no, in this province it's held by the government; the government has the apprenticeship. There are other provinces where the union is responsible for their training, but we have an apprenticeship board here. I notice one of the things that they will warn you about, well I mean for our new apprentices, they will cancel your apprenticeship now if you don't go to school or if you should not maybe make your employer as happy as he should be. But I know that they do cancel apprenticeships now for people who do not have the urge to go to school and be trained. If you don't go to school they will cancel your apprenticeship.

Q: Some trades have their own training programs right on the site of their union hall. That's different than the insulation?

VV: Yes, and that's where our training, where we've trained a lot of people for the non-union as well through our schooling. It's unbiased the schooling – it's neither union or non-union. That's probably what they wanted to do. Hi Rick.

Q: You also mentioned worksites that are 50-50 union/non-union.

VV: Which never would've happened in the old days. We would've never had anyone non-union. But we have a non-union insulation company out where we are; we have non-union contractors. This is on an \$8 billion site, which would've never happened before. We would've had control over that site and it would've been all union-built.

Q: What kind of training do these non-union guys get? What's the standard there?

VV: I really can't tell you but I know that their training and their expertise has grown from our losses. The union members that either couldn't pass the drug tests or for any reason didn't stay with the union, now they're training the non-union to do what we've been doing for years. I've heard of non-union companies that are on par – they're giving pension allowances, they have health benefits. So once they start doing that, what's the difference, where would the difference lie? The one thing that's attractive for the marijuana smokers is they don't do any drug testing for non-union. If you can't stay with the union you're gonna be going to the non-union.

Q: The union at Suncor up in Fort McMurray were fighting this case against the random drug testing, and they just actually won that. The argument they were making is that it's not a safety issue on site because actually your fellow worker will keep it safe. They're not gonna let somebody who's noticeably messed up work there in a dangerous situation. Do you want to talk about why this is so invasive and why it's not actually very effective?

VV: Well the one real big problem I see is that the guys that like smoking marijuana, and marijuana's been around for a long time, when they get told you can't smoke marijuana anymore, now they're going into harder drugs or drugs that are not tested for. The unfortunate scenario that I have, I can think of three guys right offhand that they couldn't smoke marijuana anymore so they got into the cocaine and the crack, and that totally screwed them right up. They're useless, they're no longer productive to society because they took away the marijuana. I don't think marijuana was that bad of a thing. If you can smoke a joint and then next month get fired for it and have no residual effects or anything, that's wrong. They're messing with your personal life, and I don't agree with it.

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