

Norm LeClaire

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NL: I grew up in Vancouver. My ambition was to be a mounted policeman, which I was for 12 years. When I had four kids, I found I wasn't making a living, and I quit. I obtained a job on the Vancouver city police force, which is where I grew up. I grew up in Vancouver. I had to take their training course. They wanted to give me a job in their jail out there before I went, but I didn't have the money to move my family. So I had to get a job here until this training course started, and I got a job at Canada Packers. At that time the beef plant here were trying to come under the master collective agreement to cover all of the Canada Packers meatpacking plants in Calgary. They were in a hell of a mess; you wouldn't believe the mess. I kind of got involved, in fact, took over. I was the chief shop steward of the plant when I was a probationary employee, and I never went to Vancouver. I got involved in the union labour movement. My mounted police training and background, the work that I did--a lot of prosecuting and things like that--it lent itself superbly to the labour movement and I became very involved. I became a full time rep and I spent 30 years.

Q: What was it like working in the beef packing industry in those days?

NL: That was 1965 and '66. In those days there were two plants here, Canada Packers and Canadian Dressed Meats. Meatpacking was a real misnomer. These were starter houses. That's all they did. They killed cattle and shipped them; didn't do anything else. It was real hard work performed by good hard men. There were no women in those days. The work was extremely heavy, very heavy hard, dirty, dangerous, interesting as hell. In this area it was one of the best paid industries. You could make a living and raise a family on the money that was paid.

Q: And you were doing what kind of work?

NL: I was a beef lugger. I loaded trucks. You carried quarters of beef on your shoulder the old-fashioned way.

Q: When you say things were in a mess, what do you mean?

NL: The local union. It had a bully of a superintendent who just cowed them and ran them ragged. I wasn't going to work there. You couldn't cow me and run me ragged. A few different times they challenged me to come out and fight. I said, let's go, you big fat slob. He never went, he didn't go. I was a hell of a lot younger in those days. A real interesting and fun time. Real good guys—a lot of European men doing that type of work. A lot of the guys that came over in the Hungarian Revolution in the '50s were working out there. There's a lot of them still around. They're retired now, but all good guys, and guys that made a career working in those slaughterhouses and those plants. Good people, and I loved them and decided to make a career out of it.

Q: Tell me about some of the experiences you had as a steward.

NL: In the negotiation in 1966, there were four big companies in the meatpacking industry in Canada in those days: Canada Packers, Burns, Swifts, and Intercontinental Packers. We had a common pact between all of the local unions right from Charlottetown to Vancouver with respect to collective bargaining. We had the philosophy that no employer ever had an advantage over another employer as a consequence of the union collective bargaining agreement. There were two plants at that time: this plant and the Moose Jaw plant, which was another beef house. We weren't covered by the Canada Packers master agreement. There was a strike with Canada Packers that summer across Canada and the goal was to get the Lethbridge covered by the master agreement to get it into a position to strike, which we did, and we had a two-month strike. That was my introduction right off the bat.

Q: Were we successful? Was it a victory?

NL: Yes. It came into the master agreement. I've got the files in my own office, but I don't recall. It was wages and benefits, though, no question. And relationships, representation, which was a big thing.

Q: Did conditions change in the plant after that?

NL: Oh yeah. Over the next 10 years they really changed. We made a believer out of that big superintendent. When we were done with him, he was actually a friend. That was in the summer of 1966.

Q: What do you remember about relations between the farmers and the trade unions in those days?

NL: There was no animosity either way. They didn't fault us for the disputes we were having. Mind you, the cattle industry wasn't then what it is today. There were feedlots but nothing like we've got today. There's millions of head of cattle in a 50-mile stretch here now. Cattle feeding was a big thing but it was done by farmers, not these big agribusinesses that run the feedlots that we've got today.

Q: So when there was a strike, there wasn't a wave of anti-union sentiment?

NL: No. There was some grumbling and complaining and so on, but heavens no. Nobody ever came out to our picket lines and wanted to quarrel.

Q: So, from that strike you were sucked into the labour movement. Talk about where you went from there.

NL: I became a secretary-treasurer with the Labour Council for a number of years. That was probably in '67 or '68. I joined the New Democratic Party as well, which was quite a stretch for me. That was in 1966. I did have some involvement with the Fed, not a lot though. Lethbridge isn't next door to Edmonton, which is more the headquarters of the Fed. You're a little farther away and it's a little more difficult to get to meetings and things. I knew a lot of the people, Dave for instance. I can't remember a lot of the names of the guys that work with the Fed in those days. Jack Hanson was my mentor. Jack was the guy that got me into this business. Jack's been dead a long time. He was a great trade unionist. He's the one that sold me on the idea and mentored me in and got me involved and helped make me a spec person and was a real good personal friend for quite a number of years. I worked with Jack; he was international rep and I became a rep of the local unions, a business agent as opposed to an international rep. Jack was my confidant and my advisor, the guy I phoned when I encountered something I didn't know what to do with. Super guy; great guy.

Q: What is it like to become a rep?

NL: In those days in our union, the UPWA, we hadn't merged and become amalgamated and these other mergers that occurred later. That was the old packinghouse union. The international staff did all of the servicing. There were two in Calgary, Norm Matis and Jack Hanson, and Peter Uginez out of Edmonton. They did all of the servicing. In those days the packinghouse industry in this part of the world was big. There were five packing plants in Edmonton if my memory serves me right, four in Calgary, and there were three here, one in Medicine Hat, and one in Brooks. Those guys had a hell of a workload, because they had more than that. They headed up some of the national negotiating committees. Jack headed up Intercom and Jack did Burns. Well, that all changed when the UPWA stewards merged with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters. It was Amalgamated Meat Cutters International Union. We called ourselves the CFAW, the Canadian Food and

Allied Workers. That was just a bit of local Canadian pride. When that happened the switch was to business agents when the international staff ? to do the kind of servicing. Both Jack and Norm were getting to a time in age, and shortly after we made the switch, they did both retire. I don't remember the years that they retired. I went on staff at the beginning of February 1971 and Jack retired probably two years later. I worked with him. He showed me the paper route and who was who, and introduced me to the management people you had to deal with and the industrial relations people you had to deal with. All of those companies had major industrial relations departments. Canada Packers in particular had some real heavy hitters that were just industrial relations. They were handling the union relationships period. They didn't do any insurance work or any of that. They were grievance people. Jack introduced me to all of them and then it became my paper route, not Jack's anymore. He retired and moved to Vernon. He lived in Calgary. He had a nice place on the lake in Vernon, and moved up there.

Q: What is it like being a business agent?

NL: When I started out, you had to establish your credibility. That took three or four years, and you bloody well had to knock heads to let them know you were real. You had to let them know you knew your stuff.

Q: So how did you knock heads?

NL: You filed grievances; you pursued them. I prosecuted them. I didn't call a lawyer in to go before an arbitrator. I went. Then gradually you build up the respect from these guys that have university degrees. I didn't have a university degree. Once they're satisfied that you know your stuff, life becomes a hell of a lot easier. I knocked heads for a good three or four years before we got the ground rules settled.

Q: What kinds of issues were coming up in those days?

NL: Everything--discipline, the usual. Seniority issues, transfer issues, especially in the food plants. We had a system of brackets and the difference between a one-bracket or a zero bracket job was a lot of money. There were a lot of issues. Hey, I was applying for that transfer and you liked him and he got it--that sort of thing. That was one of my jobs. I did a lot of the job rating for the beef houses in western Canada here. There was a system that I had of weighing this and that. That sort of thing. Discipline. Those are the ones that readily come to mind that were the most frequent.

Q: What kind of discipline cases do you see and what does a union do?

NL: But you know, you've got a collective agreement that's your set of by-laws or laws. That's where you begin. But then fairness enters into it too. To me the collective agreement was the bargaining. But fairness was always a factor too. You had the responsibility of selling this guy or this girl's case to that employer, whoever it was. It may have been a shady collective agreement. But that wasn't fair that you did that, you didn't promote him or her, or whatever. Or you didn't allocate overtime to him or her, or whatever the issue was. There were so many issues, as you guys all know. You've been there; you've done it. You got people what they deserved: let me put it that way. In terms of discipline, the person has a legal right to file a grievance. You have a legal obligation as a union rep to represent that person fairly and equitably and properly to the best of your ability. You had to make sure they got a fair hearing and they got treated properly. Sometimes they needed to be fired; no question that they needed to be disciplined. But you gave that person his or her opportunity to have their say and tell their side of the story. In that respect, you win some, you lose some. The employer isn't always wrong. But we always have the obligation as a union to represent that employee, an absolute legal obligation to represent him, whether he's right or wrong. That doesn't mean you have to go all the way. There's a certain point you have to say, look friend, you got your

just desserts; you were treated fairly. Most of the time you don't go there though. If the guy is properly dismissed, he usually knows too.

Q: The further south you travel from Edmonton, the more anti-union the atmosphere is.

NL: This isn't an anti-union town. The people that have a union here expect certain things from the union. I had lots of friends in CUPE and the building trades and they all had the same expectation. The ones that belonged to a union belonged because they wanted to belong. That's still the case today. It's amazing how they know what they're entitled to, and you can't BS them.

Q: Describe the processing industry in Lethbridge, because I have the idea that it was an agricultural processing center for a while and there were different kinds of plants. Talk about the shifts that have happened.

NL: At one time we had three meat plants here. We had Canada Packers. They opened in 1962. Canadian Dressed Meats opened about a year later, and then Swifts that located here in 1971. I organized the Swifts plants in 1971. That was one of the first jobs I did as a rep. Between those three plants, they killed 18 percent of all of the cattle killed in this country. In those days the market was east-west. The market for Alberta beef out of Lethbridge was Toronto and Montreal mainly, not entirely--there was some in Vancouver and so on. But most of the market was Toronto and Montreal. We had a change in philosophy in provincial government a number of years later, and I think it was Klein that said, the market should be going north-south. The province financed Cargill to build that mega-plant in High River.

Q: Why did they do that?

NL: Just a philosophical thing that the market movement was wrong--we should be moving our beef south. He also financed the Lakeside expansion. They went from having a beef plant with 125 employees to one that had 3,000, which they've got today. In each one of those plants they kill more than all of the five packing plants we used to have around here. A week's kill they do in a day. Both plants are killing huge amounts of cows. They're both American companies, and the market for our beef now isn't Toronto and Montreal. It goes into the U.S. I don't know who their customers are, but the market shifted and changed. That was because of a decision the provincial government made here a number of years ago. Canada Packers asked for the same kind of money that Cargill had got, and they would build a super plant somewhere on the edge of Lethbridge. Didn't even get a reply, never mind getting a bunch of money, which the American companies got to build. That resulted in the closure of five of our plants here in Lethbridge. Three in Lethbridge, Swifts, Canada Packers and the Breyers Meatpacking Plant, Alberta Western Beef in Medicine Hat and that little beef house we had in Brooks, which was Lakeside. It resulted in the closure of the Canada Packers plant in Calgary, the Burns plant in Calgary, Dvorkin Packers in Calgary, all of the meatpacking plants in Edmonton. Canada Packers had a 650 employee plant there. Burns had a plant; that was gone. When Swifts was going to close their plant, Pocklington bought it. He didn't buy it to run as a meatpacking plant. He thought he had a good piece of commercial industrial real estate. They went through a downward spike in real estate in Edmonton. So he ended up running it, and we had that fiasco there. But that plant is gone and the south side Gainers plant is gone. Those all went as a consequence of this shift from east-west marketing to north-south. The BSE thing now has scared the bejesus out of all of these guys and they're saying, why aren't we doing business east-west? Of course that's a hell of a good question. The memories are pretty short-lived. They don't remember that at one time not too damn long ago they had that. They're as much responsible for the shift that occurred as anybody. Instead of a guy running a 500 head feedlot he's got 200,000 now in the feedlot. Instead of being a sub-farming operation, now it's agribusiness, and big agribusiness. The issue of the north-south wasn't settled yet. This R-Calf group down in

Montana and North Dakota are still lobbying, and it'll be interesting to see with a new administration what happens with it.

Q: How has the food processing industry affected this area?

NL: Vegetable processing is always a big thing here, but that was in the canning days. We had Alberta Canning in Magrath, which was unionized. We had the Alberta Canning Plant in Lethbridge that was unionized. We had Broeders, which became the Safeway Canning Plant, which is unionized. That's a Teamster one; these other ones were ours. We have Canada Foods, which is an edible oil margarine cooking oil producer mainly from mainly canola. We had the distillery; we had the brewery. Eventually, they all became ours, became mine. The breweries closed, but the distillery is still here. We had the flour industry; still have it. But that also has downsized, but that's automation. You can do so much more in one mill than you used to do in three or four. We still have a flour industry. There's a plant in Medicine Hat; there's one in Lethbridge. There used to be three in Medicine Hat, but there's always been one here. But there used to be three in Calgary and there's only one now. The company that used to be Maple Leaf Flour has merged with some other companies and they're running a big flour mill. We had those industries. They were all union. The potato industry has undergone the same type of metamorphosis that the meatpacking industry went through. We have now three big french fried potato plants operating in southern Alberta, one in Lethbridge and one just outside of Coaldale and one just outside of Taber. Each one produces about 2-1/2 million tons of french fried potatoes each year. The one in Lethbridge is organized, and that's the old Alberta Canning Company that we had forever. It's Maple Leaf now. The others are American companies. McCain is an American company and it's not unionized. The one out of Taber is unionized but it's the Steelworkers that have it. That was because of some laziness on the part of some of our staff that resulted in that. But that's another matter. Those are big employers. They have a lot of employees and big production capabilities. A lot of what they do has really reformed the farming that's done. It's amazing how many millions of

acres are under potatoes here now. I guess you eat a different kind of potato than you make a french fry; you use a different kind of potato to make a chip. There's a number of those plants around: some are unionized, and some aren't. I never service them. So I'm not sure which ones aren't or are. That has changed the face of agriculture in this part of the world too. It gives the farmer a good cash crop. You're not waiting for a payment from the Wheat Board or whoever--a good cash crop. And, of course, the sugar beet industry is still here, and that's unionized; that's ours. That's out of Taber. But the sugar beet industry has been consolidated. At one time we had three plants. There was one in Picture Butte, Raymond and Taber. The Taber plant over the years was expanded and they eliminated Raymond first and then Picture Butte about 12 or 15 years ago. When it closed, it moved all the production to Taber, which wasn't a bad thing in the sense that we got more jobs in Taber, good-paying jobs. For a long time until they retired we had guys commuting from Raymond. They kept their job with the company and commuted from Picture Butte to Taber. I think that's all done now. Time goes by and we all get older.

Q: Describe what you do to organize a plant.

NL: Usually what you've got to do is you've got to have somebody from the plant come to you and say, look Norm, we've got a real unfair situation here. Can you help us? Of course, then you analyze the situation. Is it your complaint or is it a group complaint? You set up a little committee of two or three or four people from inside, get a list of addresses and phone numbers if you can, and you go knocking on doors. That's the simplest way. I guess you can have meetings. But then you tip the thing, and you get arguments in meetings and so on. My technique was always to knock on the doors. This is who I am, this is what I'm selling, and it's going to cost you two dollars when you sign the card. You offer them representation. You don't make any promises about pay or anything. We'll represent you. You're the union, not me. You'll have your input as to what we're going to bargain for you. I'll handle the logistics of what needs to be in a collective

agreement, but you'll decide what the pay and benefits are going to be. You sell it on that basis and you do it one by one by one most of the time.

Q: Did you ever lose a fight?

NL: Oh yeah. There was a dried potato flakes plant out at Vauxhall. There were 60 some employees out there. I had a guy inside the plant who had contacted me, contacted Jack Hanson in fact; it was back that long ago. I was green and I let him sign some cards and he phoned some and got caught. We lost that one. I organized ... Alberta Linen here, but couldn't get a strike vote out of them and they decertified. The company made all of my committee floor people and said goodbye. I lost that one. Mind you, we got certified. They rejected the company's final offer almost unanimously; then the strike vote.

Q: Do you recall a particularly sweet one that you won?

NL: The Swifts plant. They opened a new plant here. We had a deal with Canada Packers after all the plants were under the master agreement that any new plants automatically, all they had to do was go sign the members and they'd come under the agreement. Well we didn't have that at Swifts. Peter Cole and I--he was moving both the reps--we stood out on the road outside the plant. Mind you, a lot of the guys that were working in there were our guys. They knew me personally and I drank beer with them. We'd just sign them up right there on the road. That was a sweet one, because we had a real miserable asshole as a superintendent there. I won't name him; he might be alive. A real asshole.

Q: What happened when you certified? They weren't under the master agreement.

NL: Very quickly the company caved in and we put them under once we got them certified.

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