

Monica Santiago

Sept. 14, '23, Edmonton Interviewer Donna Coombs-Montrose, Camera Don Bouzek

MS: I'm from San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago.

Q: And currently?

MS: Edmonton, Alberta. What happened was that at 16 I met my boyfriend, Frank Santiago. He was planning to come to Canada to live. We were dating and then he said he was leaving in 1967, November of 1967. We got engaged and he came up to Canada. He got into Toronto and the immigration officer, there was a group of guys from Trinidad that got into Toronto, and the immigration officer said to him, if you guys want to live a comfortable life in Canada you gotta go up west. A couple of the fellows had family in Toronto. So they decided to stay. But Frank was alone and he knew he was engaged to me and he knew he was going to bring me up sometime. He wanted to work; so the guys said, go west. Frank said, well where west would I go? He says, go to Edmonton, because there was a plant building up in Fort McMurray with Syncrude, and it was the best way to work and get money in a speedy way. So he left his friends the next day and traveled up to Edmonton in 1967, November. He got into Edmonton, went to Manpower, and they told him they had jobs up in Fort McMurray. He was a pipefitter. So he decided to go up to Fort McMurray in November of 1967. He got a job and he went up to the north to work. At the end of November he sent for me. We got married in Edmonton and then we went up to Fort McMurray to live. It was quite an eyeopener. Fort McMurray at the time was just--there was nothing there. It was harsh; the winter was harsh. The company gave us a trailer to live in. Well it was a shock, because I'd never seen a trailer or lived in a trailer or anything like that. So it was strange. Anyways, he got the job up at Syncrude and he started to work up there. We lived in the town of Fort McMurray, and the buses would come and take the men out of the town and carry them to work every day at Syncrude.

Q: Was there a place where they would assemble?

MS: On all the street corners. The buses would have a map and come. There were a lot of times that he worked double time, triple time, overtime, all kinds of times, because the plant was now building. There were a lot of problems with the plant; so they'd come home from work at 4 o'clock and two hours later they'd call them back to go out back to the Athabasca Oil Sands. We were happy because the money was coming in. So we were glad that we were able to enjoy some of the things. But in Fort McMurray, the town, the streets weren't paved. There were a few buildings: Hudson's Bay had a big building, and the post office was there, and the Peter Pond Hotel. That's one of the first hotels that they had, large hotels. It was an eye opener to me because I couldn't imagine coming to Canada and seeing streets that weren't paved or whole buildings that weren't completed or anything like that. It was surprising. I cried many times; I cried an awful lot. There was nothing to do for the housewives up there except the bars, and I never went to the bar. I was 19 years old at the time.

Q: So there were other housewives like yourself?

MS: Lots of housewives, because they were taking people from all over the world to work there. We met a lot of people from all over the world. But we never united to form any group with the women. So you were still isolated by yourself. You had no friends, no community. There was a community, but it wasn't connected; so you were always alone. Some of the times the loneliness really got to me, because I had no one to talk to or visit with. Then when you'd go uptown to the small shopping area, the older residents who lived there, like the pharmacist, the druggist, the storekeepers, they would always engage you in conversation. As time went by, we started to visit with these people and you'd hang out with the druggist or the pharmacist or whatever. But everyone knew each other, the storekeepers and wives and stuff. Everybody was in the same position – nowhere to go and nothing to do. So we made friends curling, bowling, whatever we would do as a group. Some of the women and I would get together and we'd have that as fun times. But the men were constantly out there because the plant was operating, but lots of problems to operate the plant.

Q: What area did you live in?

MS: We lived in the trailers. The company, Great Canadian Oil Sands. GCOS, they set up in the town communities with trailer courts. So I lived in a trailer court. They gave the employees trailers; we rented trailers from them. There were hundreds of trailers out there.

Q: Were you a close distance to the Syncrude plant?

MS: No, we were miles away from the camp, miles away. In the town of Fort McMurray is where the trailer courts were was where we lived. I can't remember how many miles, but miles out was the plant and oil sands.

Q: Did the pharmacist and others in the community live in the trailer court as well?

MS: Well some of them had homes. I don't think there were many homes there, but a few of them had homes. The store owners and pharmacists and stuff, I think they had homes. But the workers and their wives lived in the trailer courts.

Q: Did you have a family?

MS: No, I got pregnant two years after. Tony was born in 1969, and we went up there in 1967. My oldest one was born in Fort McMurray in 1969. By then the housewives had formed little groups and visited with each other.

Q: What did you call the group?

MS: We didn't have a name for the groups. But I met a lot of people from Poland; we met a lot of people from England, Scotland, Ireland.

Q: Was it multinational?

MS: Multinational, multination. I had a girlfriend and she was Arab. You find the ethnic people kind of stuck together. I had a friend from British Guyana and his wife was from Scotland. So we were all mixed up, but everybody got along fine because there was nothing really to do in Fort McMurray. There were no clubs or associations. There were so many ethnic people but really there were no clubs. But the company, GCOS, would have picnics once a year and we'd all get together and go. Things were good at that time. That was in 1969, 1970, in the '70s. The thing that really struck me as odd was that there were no paved streets. I didn't think coming to Canada that I would ever live in a place that the streets were not paved. So that was really something odd coming from Trinidad, such a small country with streets paved, and not seeing streets paved. But it's not until maybe two years later we drove down to Edmonton and I saw Edmonton for the first time with the streets paved and the traffic lights and stuff, and didn't realize that I lived so far north that these things didn't exist.

Q: You didn't have lights, either?

MS: We had street lights but it wasn't great. The streets weren't paved and not many cars were on the road. The guys were working 24-7.

Q: Did your family have a car?

MS: Not until we bought a car in 1969. We came down to Edmonton and we bought a car.

Q: Leaving Trinidad, what were your expectations?

MS: I expected to see a city with city buildings and amenities that the city offers. So it was quite a cry because leaving Trinidad we had not huge buildings but they weren't just trailers and miles of trailers. So that was surprising, the little trailer city we had. But we had a hospital.

Q: At the time you moved there?

MS: Yes, because my son was born at the hospital in '69. We moved in '67; so there was a hospital.

Q: Was there a social life for you?

MS: Well just with your neighbours, just the neighbours. If you connected with a neighbour, that was your social life. There were pubs and stuff but up there it was rough at the time.

Q: What do you mean by rough?

MS: Rough with the people and the drinking and the men. It wasn't a place that women went too often to frequent. At the time too, one of the hotels, and that was maybe the first hotel Fort McMurray had. It had a separate entrance where women went in one door and men went in the other door. You really couldn't mix. They weren't allowing the women to mix in the pubs with the men. That was one particular pub, the Oil Sands. I think it could've been the first hotel built up there; it was old. There were three hotels, and the other two were better. But there was only that one hotel uptown. You couldn't go into the men's section and there was a separate entrance.

Q: Were there any activities for children or families?

MS: No. Except the Great Canadian Oil Sands in the summer would give a barbeque for the staff and stuff like that. There were no programs for kids. They just went to school and that was it.

Q: How did this compare to what you left back in Trinidad?

MS: Well it was surprising. I didn't think there was a part of Canada that was so rural. It really surprised me. I don't know what I was thinking of – every country has its rural areas. But I never expected to end up living in a rural area. You were mostly hearing about Vancouver and Toronto, New York, and those kinds of cities. But you never heard of Edmonton. Until I came here, that's the first time I ever heard the word Edmonton, much less Fort McMurray. When we got married, we got married in the Catholic church down here in the city in Edmonton. Then we flew that night in a plane up to Fort McMurray. The airport was just a little shed. When the planes landed, there was one taxi, and once they left the airport everything was shut down.

Q: What did you do for food?

MS: Hudson's Bay had a grocery store, so we used to go to Hudson's Bay. Hudson's Bay had a very large store – clothes, mechanics, whatever, and they had a grocery store there. So we'd take the one taxi every Friday when he got paid and we'd go get groceries up at Hudson's Bay.

Q: So food-wise, it was Hudson's Bay or nothing?

MS: Hudson's Bay or nothing, yeah.

Q: How many gas stations did the town have at that time?

MS: Maybe one or two. We didn't have a car, but maybe one or two gas stations; I can't remember seeing three. The town was just a straight street up and straight down. The houses were spread out but the main drag had everything on it – the hotels were there; the pharmacy was there.

Q: So you had Anthony in 1969.

MS: '69, two years later.

Q: How did life evolve for you after that? Did anything change?

MS: No, the men went to work and the women stayed at home and looked after the children, and that was it. There was nothing there that could've been evolved. People weren't doing clubs, like service clubs or anything like that. It's just every day you get up and do the same thing over, or you drive uptown or you walk uptown and you walk back down.

Q: It must have been boring.

MS: It was very boring. Coming from Trinidad, Trinidad wasn't the bright city lights, but it had a lot of activities; the hub was there. I spent many nights crying and wanting to get out of there, but the commitment, you're married; you felt you had to stay.

Q: How did Frank feel?

MS: Well he was meeting people every day, because he worked. But the wives weren't meeting, except the neighbour next door, if the neighbour wanted to talk to you or not. But he was okay because he had lunch break with the men, coffee break with the men, working with the men. So he was okay.

Q: Did you meet any other Caribbean wives?

MS: Yes, I met John and Eileen Batiste. They were from Trinidad too, John and Eileen. The strangest thing is that I went to elementary school with Eileen. So we developed quite a relationship the first Christmas we spent up there.

Q: Where is she now?

MS: She just passed away, and he passed away too. But we were friends until her death. We moved to Edmonton in 1972 and they moved about '75 to Edmonton from Fort McMurray. So we regained our friendship and stayed close ever since. She stayed for my children as godparents. I stayed for hers.

Q: So by now were you having your second child?

MS: Yes, I had Frankie up there. Frankie was born in '70. Tony was '69, Frankie was '70.

Q: Were they both schooled up there?

MS: No, they were too young still for school. We moved to Edmonton in 1972. So he was two years old and Tony was two and a half.

Q: Did you ever adjust to living in Fort McMurray?

MS: Yes, there was an adjustment because I made friends with a lot of the women around. You had friends. So you have coffee with the friends and bake with the friends and do all kinds of stuff with the friends. But the friends weren't from the island; they weren't from Trinidad. One was a Ukrainian woman. She was older than me. So she kind of took me under her wing like I was her grandchild. We pickled and made a lot of stuff during the time until we left. My friend was married to a Guyanese guy. She's from Scotland, and her children and Tony and Frankie were raised together. They're still friends to this day, the kids.

Q: Was there a steel band or other social things?

MS: No, not while I was there. We left in 1972 to move to Sherwood Park. Frank wanted a change of jobs. So he decided to move to Edmonton and look closer around for jobs. But he still worked many years in Fort McMurray after that, even though we moved. He was traveling back and forth and stuff like that. But at one point he worked in Fort Saskatchewan, which was close to home. We bought a home in Sherwood Park; so that was close to home.

Q: What prompted you to move to Sherwood Park in particular?

MS: He thought that it would be closer to getting jobs in the refinery, because in Strathcona there was a refinery built there and Fort Saskatchewan had another refinery built with different companies working. That's why we moved to Sherwood Park, because it was close to jobs and he wouldn't have to travel out of town as much.

Q: This was 1972?

MS: In '72 we moved, yeah in 1972.

Q: So you grew your family in Sherwood Park.

MS: Yes, we lived there for 40 some years.

Q: Did he continue to work at that point in the oilfields?

MS: Oh yeah, he worked in the oilfields all his life. If he had to go to Fort McMurray, he'd go to Fort McMurray. If he had to go to Cold Lake, to Fox Creek, to wherever, he went. Our base was Sherwood Park.

Q: Tell me about the Caribbean friends you met in Fort McMurray.

MS: There was the one Caribbean, Eileen and John Batiste. But we met some black Canadians that came up years ago from the States. They lived in Fort McMurray, two or three Canadian families, Black Canadian families that lived in Fort McMurray with us.

Q: Are you still in touch with them?

MS: Yes, I am.

Q: Do they live in Edmonton now?

MS: Calgary, they moved to Calgary after a while.

Q: Were you able to see how Syncrude was developing?

MS: Well they would have open houses at times, but really at the time I was 21 or 22 and wasn't interested in that. My focus was on raising the kids and doing what I can to help. But the job wasn't part of who I was, and Frank never brought the job home to the house. He never told us about his job. The kids didn't know for many years what their dad did. The kids weren't inquisitive at the time, and we never really talked about it much.

Q: So the job never came home. He left it at the workplace.

MS: That's right.

Q: Did he show any signs of pressure from his work?

MS: If he did, he never showed us. He never showed; he never told us about the job. For many years the kids didn't even know what he did. Dad's going to work in Fort McMurray, and that was it.

Q: What do you think of that? Do you think it would've helped the children?

MS: No, I don't think so. At the time, some of the jobs were dangerous. He felt that keeping it away from me was a better thing to do. So he really didn't discuss it. We met a lot of the men, a lot of the fellows, because they traveled by bus. They'd come home on the weekend on Friday night and then they'd leave on Sunday. We'd have to drive into the city to the bus stops, different stops all over the city, and this way we got to meet the children. They'd be out playing as their dad's waiting for the bus with Frank, and that's how we got to know a couple of the families and the children, through just meeting at the bus stop on a Sunday night.

Q: So he would have to leave Sunday night?

MS: Yes, Sunday night the bus would pick them up. He lived in the camp all the days he worked.

Q: Would he catch the bus in Sherwood Park, or in Edmonton?

MS: It first started in Edmonton but as the men got more and more, they made different bus stops. Sherwood Park had a few; Bonnie Doon had some. We would go to Argyll Road; we would go there sometimes, and there you meet different families. But it was just for a short time that we'd meet the wives and stuff like that. I learned to drive in Fort McMurray at the vocational centre; about 1970 I learned to drive. The vocational centre there was giving the driver's education. So I learned to drive. That's how I was able to drive him to the different bus stops. He met the bus at different stops, and we'd drive to that stop and drop him off. But we'd stay until the bus left. So all the kids would play around the area where we were parked waiting for the bus.

Q: So this was now a few years since you'd left Trinidad.

MS: I left in 1967 and this is '72.

Q: Are you feeling less lonely now?

MS: No.

Q: You never stopped missing Trinidad?

MS: I didn't say I was missing Trinidad; it's just that it was just things to do at that moment. I had to raise my kids. They had to go to school here. There were so many things that Trinidad wasn't a thought to say I'm missing Trinidad. The first couple years without the children from '67 to '70, that's when I missed and wanted to go right back home and wanted to be back home again. But I stayed and toughed it out.

Q: What did you do in Sherwood Park?

MS: The kids were small at the time; so I couldn't really do much. Then I had a third child in 1970, no wait just a sec, '79. He's eight years older, so '79. Those first two were back to back but the other one came later on.

Q: What's his name?

MS: Curtis. He's the last one. First he started into music; then he got into the arts. So he's now painting miniature art. He does all of that. Anthony is an actor and Frank was just football and sports. In all the time that I'm raising them, Frank was never around. He was working, and only came home on weekends.



Q: Did he work long days?

MS: I think they did 10-hour days. But I was responsible for taxiing the kids all over the place for their sports and different activities they were doing.

Q: How was life for you?

MS: I was so busy raising the children; really my focus was mostly on the children. Whatever had to be done had to be done.

Q: Did you at any point open your own business?

MS: Yeah, but before that I used to be involved with teaching children to pedal pushers, riding their bikes, and different activities. I had children I used to babysit at daycare like for a while. When Curtis, who was born in 1979, when he was small and I had him at home, I took in children for daycare.

Q: I've seen pictures of your son at Grant MacEwan.

MS: That was Anthony. Anthony went to Grant MacEwan.

Q: Frank went to NAIT?

MS: Yes.

Q: Did they have more understanding then of what their dad was doing?

MS: Now they do. As they got older, they started asking him questions and they found out what he was all about and doing and stuff like that. They were curious to know why he didn't share it with them. He said the job was so rough and scary to him that he didn't want to pass that fear on to us. He told us he'd be on high tension wires up high hundreds of feet in the sky, no straps or harness or anything at the time. This was in 1967 until the law came in that they had to be in harness and stuff. He said how many times he walked the beams 50 to 100 feet in the wintertime with no harness or anything. So he kept that part of the job from us; he didn't want to scare us. They were building the Great Canadian Oil Sands, GCOS.

Q: Was it Syncrude?

MS: Syncrude is who ran it.

Q: Who was his employer?

MS: Catalytic Converters. They were the maintenance people who maintained.

Q: So GCOS built the plant.

MS: Yes.

Q: And Syncrude came in to run it.

MS: Yes. And maintenance was Catalytic.

Q: So shutdowns and stuff would be Catalytic?

MS: Yeah, Catalytic.

Q: Did he encourage any of his sons to work at Syncrude?

MS: I don't think so, but the kids weren't interested. We had Frankie take electrical at NAIT, but Frank was not interested in working in a plant with so many people from all over the world. It was a rough site, rough because they had a lot of bikers and lots of rough people that he didn't want his sons to really work there.

Q: Where did the rough people come from?

MS: All over. You know, bikers and different groups of people from all different parts of the world.

Q: Any Indigenous?

MS: No not Indigenous, hardly did they have Indigenous people working at the time when he first started. It was just from America, the States, they used to come up to work there.

Q: Did he ever say that's not what he was expecting when he came from Trinidad?

MS: No, because in Trinidad he didn't have a permanent job. So when he came to Canada and had this permanent job, he was never thinking of going back to Trinidad. Here he was able to raise his family and have a good life.

Q: What would you describe as a good life?

MS: You're able to buy a house, you're able to buy cars, you go on holidays. We went on holidays many times back to the islands.

Q: As the matriarch of the Santiago clan, how did you view this period of your life going forward?

MS: I was 19 going on 20 years old. So really my life was pretty simple at home. Our parents were able to take care of us. So I had no worries or stress about anything. Coming here and getting married and then raising the family, it still was pretty simple to me because he was working every single day.

Q: Did he work seven days a week?

MS: Seven days sometimes, five days sometimes. It was just crazy building that GCOS plant.

Q: What kind of hours did he work?

MS: Ten-hour days five days a week, and sometimes they'd have to go back if there was a problem at the plant to repair. We were flourishing and things were reasonably comfortable for us.

Q: At what point did you decide to strike out on your own and follow your creative interests?

MS: I was always sort of a creative person that liked to do different things. I'd bake and get all the teachers to buy my cookies at Christmastime. I'd make dolls, sewn doll clothes. I always did something, even though I didn't have to. I always liked doing things. So I did a lot of sewing. I used to sew Frank's clothes, pants and jackets for Frank.

Q: You're a tailor.

MS: Well no not a tailor, trying to be a seamstress. I'd bake and sell a lot of baking.

Q: To whom?

MS: The teachers when the kids started going to elementary school. This is in Sherwood Park. I'd get all the teachers to sign up for Christmas cookies, and bake batches and batches and deliver to the school. A little entrepreneurship. It kept me busy, plus the kids and their sports. They were all in sports, every one of them.

Q: Did you ever sew any Cariwest costumes?

MS: No, I just sewed for Frank and myself.

Q: Were you involved in Cariwest?

MS: I was involved after I stopped sewing. Curtis was now about 16 or 17 when I got involved with Cariwest.

Q: What did you do with Cariwest?

MS: I was on the board at one time. After that when I had my restaurant--I had a restaurant--and when I had that, I would cook for the carnival, rent a booth and do the cooking. I did a lot of the Shaw Convention Centre's selling there, and dances. If Cariwest had a dance, I'd be selling there too.

Q: When was this?

MS: In the '80s, late '80s I started that.

Q: And that evolved into a restaurant?

MS: The restaurant came first. I had the restaurant for ten years in the '80s.

Q: You had community activities at the restaurant as well, and this was in the 2000's.

MS: In the '90s, late '80s and '90s. I closed it I think in 1990.

Q: This shows that you were extending the Santiago team.

MS: I was more extending the West Indian team. It was a West Indian restaurant. So it was there for the West Indian purpose.

Q: So you were supporting the community?

MS: Like in what way?

Q: Was this part of the role that your restaurant played, as being involved in the community?

MS: Yes. Some of the guys used to come and play cards on a Friday night or Saturday night. If the Caribbean people had anything going, I'd always offer my services or cook for it.

Q: Where did Frank Jr. get his inspiration from to get into business?

MS: I don't know. All of them were involved in some way or form. Curtis was a singer. He went and branched out into singing before he started doing his artist work. Tony was into acting; so he really was just an actor. Frankie always liked maybe following his mom.

Q: You said "just" an actor, but he was at Stratford.

MS: Yes he wasn't "just" an actor, that "just" shouldn't be there. He's an actor, a brilliant actor at Stratford.

Q: Is he still working as an actor?

MS: Oh yes, he'll work there until he dies. He just loved to act. One year when he was about eight or nine years old there was a call at the Citadel in the newspaper saying they were starting a children's program. I said to him, Tony, do you want to go and put your name in there? He said, yes. I don't know if it was the best thing I did for him, to encourage him, because all he ever wants to do is act. He said that's all he wants to do in life, is to act. He just loves it. He just wants to be an actor. He met one of the greatest guys. I was asking the gentleman here about the guy who encouraged here in Grant MacEwan to do his acting. He did so many plays here.

Q: What does Frankie do?

MS: Frank Jr. likes to dabble in everything. He likes sports; he loves sports. He used to play football for the high school; he used to do a lot of sports and stuff. He liked cars, too. He liked to drive into the mud, into the rivers and stuff like that off-roading. He always did have a love for that off-roading stuff. So that's what he does mostly now. But he works with his wife in the potato plant. They're going to open a new plant on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month in Leduc County.

Q: What's it called?

MS: Little Potato Company. He was the building manager there for the big plant;, so they're opening next week. Curtis is in Germany; he loves his art.

Q: Who is Braxton?

MS: Braxton is Frank's son. I love his art also.

Q: So nobody in the family is thinking of Fort McMurray anymore.

MS: No.

Q: Everybody is anchored in arts.

MS: Anchored all over the place, but not Fort McMurray.

Q: Did you maintain friendships with anybody from Fort McMurray?

MS: I used to, but they all moved out. I think the working conditions had changed a couple years ago, like 10 or 12 years ago. And they're older now, because it was the '70s so whoever

was there has moved back into the city and Calgary and stuff like that, the people we used to socialize with a lot.

Q: Anybody from the Caribbean?

MS: No, only John and Eileen, and they're both dead.

Q: Nobody moved back to Trinidad?

MS: No I don't think so; nobody moved back to the Caribbean.

Q: You don't know anybody who moved back to the Caribbean from the oil and gas experience that you had?

MS: No.

Q: Did you move back to the Caribbean?

MS: Well yes we did. Frank and I moved back, yes.

Q: Anyone else that you know of? Many people came from the Caribbean to work in the oil sector.

MS: Yes, but not many people came to Alberta. The crowd of people we know that have homes in Trinidad and go back and forth, they lived in Ontario. That was the hub for when you leave Trinidad; it was Toronto. As I say, nobody had ever heard of Edmonton until the immigration guy told Frank about Edmonton. That was never heard of before.

Q: Did you know Cecil George in Fort McMurray?

MS: No, we left Fort McMurray before Cecil and Marjorie moved up there. Randy Kokaram: we moved before they came up to Fort McMurray. A lot of us moved in 1972 because there's a family in Fort Saskatchewan from Trinidad that were up with us too, the Poriels. They moved to Fort Saskatchewan the year we moved. The West Indian people were all moving out in 1972 like they had had enough and they were moving out. The few that were there were able to buy homes in the short space of time, so they moved out after five or six years. The Poriels went to Fort Saskatchewan; Percel went to St. Albert; we came to Sherwood Park. We just kind of dispersed.

Q: Is Fort Mac a place where people don't want to stay forever?

MS: At the time we were there, it wasn't. Everything was so far away from the city. Fort Mac was growing but it was growing very slow. Entertainment and stuff like this, you couldn't just enjoy many things up there.

Q: When you were living in Fort McMurray, did Syncrude or GCOS do anything for the community or for families?

MS: Maybe they did. I don't know of GCOS doing it, but we were Catalytic. You were almost divided – the Catalytic workers kind of stayed among the Catalytic workers. GCOS were the people who were permanent workers there. So there was a little class barrier.

Q: What were the Catalytic workers?

MS: They were all union members, all union workers: millwrights, pipefitters, electricians, labourers, the whole works. They ran that section. Carpenters, welders, pipefitters, labourers. But GCOS had all the operators. They were operating the plant; they were the operators. So they were permanent workers.

Q: What union did the Catalytic workers belong to?

MS: All the unions, all the labour unions. Syncrude had the Great Canadian Oil Sands workers and they could've been unionized, but they were permanent workers for the plant. All the others were whichever union you belonged to.

Q: Who came under the umbrella of Syncrude itself?

MS: Syncrude was the name of the plant.

Q: But they didn't have their own workforce?

MS: I don't know. I just know they had all the operators were GCOS workers.

Q: What encouraged you to move back to Trinidad?

MS: The weather. It was too cold. We had too many years in the cold. So we decided to go to a warm place. I wasn't going to go to any other place for the warmth except back to the island, my birthplace.

Q: Do you come back here periodically?

MS: I come every year. Every year we come back during the warm weather, the warmest weather in Canada. Now it's time to start looking south again.

Q (Don): When you were in Fort McMurray, were there many people who'd been there all their lives, or was it mainly people coming in to work?

MS: People coming in to work. Maybe the Natives, but then you didn't mix with the Natives really; so you don't know. But the other people were people that came in, business people who brought the business into Fort McMurray.

Q: Were the people in the trailer park where you were living mainly the families of workers?

MS: Just workers from Great Canadian Oil Sands and the Catalytic maintenance people. Catalytic was maintenance. So we were all together in one area.

Q: Were some of them just single guys?

MS: No, mostly families, husbands and wives, if even they had no children; husbands and wives. The single guys would live in the camps out at the plant. There were camps out there; so they'd stay.

Q: And they'd see their spouse on the weekends.

MS: No, the single guys who had no wives lived mostly in the camps. Married guys got the trailers to live in.

Q: I suppose there were some managers living in the town as well.

MS: There was a few apartments, not many, that maybe the managers and them would live in. But I didn't know of any living in the trailer park. You get supervisors and stuff like that, but they were Catalytic workers, which were union workers. So we were all together.

Q: Was Frank in a union?

MS: Yes, he was Pipefitters and Plumbers, 488.

Q: Catalytic was involved in maintenance. So they continued after the plant was up and running?

MS: Oh yes, they ran for years and years and years, Catalytic.

Q: And that was a Syncrude plant?

MS: Yes, Great Canadian Oil Sands.

Q: Where does Suncor fit into this?



MS: Suncor, could be years later they changed the name. It could be one of those. . . Suncrude became Suncor.

Q: Have you been back to Fort McMurray since you moved away?

MS: I think I was there twice. Two times I went up maybe in the '80s, and I haven't been back.

Q: Did you notice changes?

MS: When I went back in the '80s I stayed at my girlfriend's house, and there were lots of community houses built all around all up on the hill where we had nothing but a ski slope. They have homes up there, the big river running through. It's changed so much now.

Q: How did that make you feel?

MS: Really I had no care really. I didn't have a feeling, because what had happened it was so dismal before when I lived there that I was so glad to get out of there. Even though we came to Sherwood Park and it was still away from the city, you still could get to the city. When we lived in Fort McMurray you planned to go to the city, and it was a planning that you did for a couple weeks. Then you come down and stay in a hotel and then you're back up there again. But I'm not a very emotional person. I just felt like I had a job to do. He brought me up, I had babies. I had to raise my babies. I had to send them to school. I had to take them to sports. Those are the things that I just set my goals at. I never really stopped to enjoy. Now I'm enjoying my life because I don't have responsibilities.

Q: What was it like for your kids going to school in Sherwood Park?

MS: The neighbourhood I moved into, we were all young wives and having young children. Around my area the wives weren't prejudiced, they weren't fussy. They accepted us like we were one of them. Sherwood Park was a good place to be for me. My friends would call up and say, come on up for coffee. It was a lot of coffeering at the time in the '70s and '80s, lots of coffeering. The kids got along well in the school and well with the neighbours. When my kids were growing up, the three boys, they would babysit. The neighbours would call them to babysit the girl children. They weren't prejudiced about the boys. Can Frankie come out and babysit? So Sherwood Park was a good time; it was a good time for us. Frank was away most of the time, but all the neighbours on the street were very friendly.

Q: Could you identify these places?

MS: This is one of the trailers in Fort McMurray where we lived. Anthony could've been about, that's my first child, he could've been about eight or nine months old at the time. So I'd dress

him up and take him for walks and stuff like that. My other son was nowhere in sight; he wasn't born yet. Tony was born in 1969. So that could be about 1970.

Q: That looks cold.

MS: Very cold. That's all I could think about Fort McMurray – very cold. But the neighbours next door to us were friendly and always tried to engage us in stuff they were doing or would come over or invite us. There was a lot of coffeing at the time. In those years people coffeed an awful lot. I didn't even know I had those pictures. He was born in '69 and he could've been about nine months old there.

Q: You were talking about trying to find food you were familiar with.

MS: The first time I sent Frank out to get a cabbage, he brought iceberg lettuce. He thought it was a cabbage and he bought it, but it was iceberg lettuce. We cooked it, but it wasn't like a cabbage; it withered so quickly. But the food, as long as we had chicken and fish and beef, and other things like potatoes, then it wasn't bad. It wasn't like you get in the islands, but I just made do with whatever I had. But it never bothered me; it never really bothered me. We just ate. There was macaroni; we were used to macaroni. We weren't used to spaghetti. In the islands we never had spaghetti when I was growing up. But the beans and beans in tomato sauce, we had that. What I loved in Canada when I first came up, a can of Sunripe apple juice, the big cans like that. It used to be 87 cents and we used to buy that like it was water. Apple juice, you're not getting that in Trinidad; so that was really something that we loved. We still think about it. Him and I sometimes sit and talk about, remember when we used to buy the apple juice?

Q: But you didn't have food that you were familiar with from back home?

MS: No, we had no food that we were familiar with from back home. But as I said, it just. . . and he was used to camp food too. He was used to the meat and the bacon and stuff like that and eggs, which you had in Trinidad but not in large quantities. But he was in his heyday when he was in camp, because he's getting all these different foods. Even now my grandson says, grandma how can you eat that? If I just have chicken and some little carb, I'm fine. I didn't have to have the daily grinds of what we were used to in Trinidad. Even now I don't eat like that. From the day I didn't get it, I made a choice. I used what I had and it really was never a problem not getting the stuff from Trinidad that I was used to. We make our dough; we knead the flour and made the dough. And we opened sardines, because sardines is a Canadian dish. It was from New Brunswick. So we had a lot of sardines that we were used to, but you couldn't get it in McMurray. McMurray didn't have that, but in the grocery store you could get cans of sardines on the shelf. So we used that instead. Salmon was in the can; so we used the salmon in the can. I didn't miss Trinidad that much. Maybe my husband did, but he was having a heyday with the Canadian big steaks in the camp and the whole works, and he wasn't even thinking of Trinidad. Every year he comes up here he says, oh my gosh, I can't get over the steaks. You can't get good

steaks in Trinidad; so he likes his steaks. Oh my goodness, Monica, today they brought steaks or they did roast beef or they did the salted beef, the corned beef. Those are the things he likes; so he really didn't miss much of Trinidad. He thought the camp was like Christmas. He loved food; so he just enjoyed all those camps. If they had complaints like some guys from Jamaica or Trinidad complained that they can't get the food they're used to, he said, are they crazy? Do they see the big steaks that they're putting out here for us, or the corned beef, or the beef tongue? In Trinidad we didn't have beef tongue. But he liked the Canadian food ever since he came.

Q: Did he meet other guys from Trinidad at work?

MS: Oh yeah, he met lots over the years.

Q: Was he in the position of general foreman?

SM: He was a foreman and then maybe general foreman sometimes, but he was mostly foreman. He never liked too much responsibility. The more responsibility, the more you meet arrogant people. Camp is a rough place. Camp was never a smooth and quiet place, it's guys from all over the world with different personalities and everything. He felt like it was rough at times.

Q: Did he ever experience racism?

SM: Oh lots, yes. But he never complained too much. There was lots of racism, lots in the camp. But he just never told us about that part of it. He didn't want us to worry about him, so he just kept it in.

Q: Did he ever file a grievance?

SM: Oh he filed grievances; he had fights; he had all kinds of stuff. He wasn't taking anything from people. So he would have fights and grievances. But always he had a personality that people love; so there was always some guy who would stand up and say, this is not how it happened. It happened because he got up off his chair and somebody pulled the chair away or something like that to make him upset. He got in trouble lots of times but always somebody would stand up for him – some white guy, some Arab guy. Somebody would say, this is not how it happened. So I think that is one of the reasons too he never wanted the children to work in the refineries. He saw too much prejudice.

[ END ]