

# Reconstructing Alberta Working-Class History via Oral History: A Challenge for a Politically Engaged Academic

*Alvin Finkel, Athabasca University*

*Until recently, the literature on Alberta working-class history focused on institutions and on major events, particularly strikes and protests.<sup>1</sup> But what do the participants themselves make of their lives as workers and in some cases militant workers and trade union activists? What do they regard as their victories and their failures? Interviews by the Alberta Labour History Institute have focused on letting workers tell their own story, and that general concept informs the organization's publications and videos, including a video on the closing of Edmonton's Celanese plant and a recent book on the history of working people in Alberta. Given that focus on letting workers speak for themselves, how does an academic involved in the project go about interpreting what these workers have to say? This article reflects, from a critical insider's point of view, the extent to which oral histories add new dimensions to Alberta's labour history and the extent to which they may also create new mythologies because of reluctance either to critique or place in context the evidence of oral sources. All of this then raises the issue of how far an academic, trained to plumb all discourses for more critical meanings, can go if they wish to be part of an endeavour in which they share with trade unionists an effort to extract meaning from labour's past that is of use to working people's struggles in the present and future.*

The Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI) was founded by labour activists in 1999 with an agenda of recording the history of working people in the province. The initial founding group invited several labour historians to join with them, beginning with me. I was more than happy to join because almost three decades earlier, as an MA student and well known political activist in Winnipeg,<sup>2</sup> I had

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<sup>1</sup> The standard history on Alberta workers before 2012 was Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979), still an essential guide to working-class militancy in Alberta from the 1880s to the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> I was only 22 when this project almost came my way but I had edited the student newspaper at the University of Manitoba and subsequently served as assistant editor at *Canadian Dimension*. I had also been a summer reporter for three years at the *Winnipeg Tribune* before being blacklisted by the local media for my role in exposing the Churchill Forest Industries scandal in northern Manitoba, which involved both Conservative and NDP governments handing over between them \$100 million dollars of public money to companies that proved to be fraudsters. Active in the student movement, the Waffle group within the NDP, the New Democratic Youth, the peace

been approached by Roland Penner and Norman Penner<sup>3</sup> to interview a large group of venerable Communist and social democratic labour activists of the inter-war period in storied North Winnipeg whom it was feared would soon pass away without anyone having recorded their impressions of the movements of which they had been part. Unfortunately the funding that the Penners had anticipated for this research project failed to materialize, and I was in no financial position to do the work for free in hopes of future funding, as they suggested I might consider. Most of those whom we had planned to interview would die without anyone ever recording their stories. I hoped that we could do a better job of capturing the lives of Edmonton and Alberta's earlier generations of working-class leaders than Winnipeg's Left had managed to do in the 1970s.

But, like other groups involved in oral history, ALHI had an agenda that went beyond merely recording reminiscences. It wanted to use reminiscences to spark an interest in reviving radicalism among the current generation of Alberta workers. And that meant inevitably a certain bias in terms of who we wanted to interview, and what stories we hoped they would tell. But other biases were more implicit than explicit. This article attempts to explore, from a self-critical point of view, the strengths and the weaknesses in ALHI's work to date, both in terms of whom it interviews and what it does with the interviews. The focus is on the extent to which oral histories add new dimensions to Alberta's labour history and the extent to which they may also create new mythologies because of reluctance on the part of labour historians focusing on oral history either to critique or place in context the evidence of oral sources. It looks at the limitations of some of ALHI's earliest work, and later efforts to overcome those limitations. It also examines in the light of ALHI's goals, biases, and methodologies<sup>4</sup> two pieces of work for which I was placed in charge by ALHI: first, the production of a DVD

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movement, and much else, the combination of my politics, my journalistic and academic backgrounds made me a logical choice to interview both communists and social democrats, many of whom would not sit in a room together.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Penner and Norman Penner were the sons of Jacob Penner, Winnipeg's long-time Communist member of city council, and had been Communist activists in their youth who drifted away from the party after the revelations about the Stalin period during the Khrushchev era and the subsequent failure, from their point of view, of the Canadian party to change directions significantly from the Stalinist period. Roland was a lawyer and law professor at the University of Manitoba who became Attorney-General in the NDP government of Howard Pawley in the 1980s. Norman Penner became a political science professor at York University.

<sup>4</sup> In brief, the goal of ALHI was to record the stories of trade union activists with an emphasis on those who were aging. Its early bias, more implicit than explicit, was that this meant recording the reminiscences of white, male trade union officials and organizers of the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. The methodology favoured was to allow these individuals to tell their story to an interviewer, usually a long-time friend or acquaintance from the union movement, who would ask only as many questions as seemed necessary to get them started. The camera would roll as the interviewee spoke to the interviewer.

dealing with the closing of a major industrial operation outside Edmonton, and secondly the production of a book in conjunction with the Alberta Federation of Labour to commemorate the AFL's centennial. While this is an effort to be somewhat blunt about labour oral history as practiced by ALHI and similar groups, my efforts are no doubt constrained by my allegiance to a group which I serve as an executive officer and long-time activist. Some of what I say here I would choose not to express within ALHI because it might seem to slight our collective work, work that is in fact invaluable. Since ALHI is for the most part an activist group with a partially academic agenda, I wear both an activist's and an academic's hat within the group and no doubt within this article as well, but in different proportions.

### **Defining an Agenda and Interpreting Interviews**

At its earliest meetings, most of the key members of ALHI were trade union activists who were already retired or near retirement. Unsurprisingly, they wanted to focus on aged trade union leaders and activists. That made sense since, as in the Winnipeg case, we were about to lose a great deal of working-class leadership experience to the Grim Reaper and time was not on our side if we did not hurry up and record the reminiscences of the leaders of unionization efforts and strikes from the 1930s through the 1960s. And, as in Winnipeg, there was no question that we would be interviewing trade unionists of several political persuasions: communist, social democratic, liberal, and apolitical. But as the list was drawn up, it became clear that like our ALHI activists themselves, most people whom we would be interviewing were white males. So, not only were we excluding almost all workers who had not become at least leaders at the local level, but we were also focusing on the narrow demographic from which labour leaders were chosen in earlier generations.

Fortunately, two of our activists were African-Canadian women who were keen to interview both pioneer African-Canadian teachers and activists in the Alberta Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. So our early interviews did include members of the province's African-Canadian community. But, because of the composition of our group, it was years until we did any interview with Aboriginal workers, and we still have completed very few. Other non-white groups are also only minimally represented in our interviews.<sup>5</sup>

Decisions about what to ask interviewees created some debate in our fledgling organization. As Alessandro Portelli points out, "Oral history...refers [to]what the source [i.e. the narrator] and the historian [i.e. the interviewer] do

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<sup>5</sup> Fortunately we are not the only people doing interviews with Alberta workers. The GWG project, headed up by Catherine C. Cole, has done extensive interviews with former workers at GWG, which includes a cross-section of ethnicities, and a clear female majority.

together at the moment of their encounter in the interview.”<sup>6</sup> But we had some disagreements about what our role in that encounter should be. We were all agreed that we wanted our interviewees to tell us about their work lives and why they became involved with the union, rather than to simply tell us about their roles as union leaders. But did we want to walk in with a set list of questions, or did we want to ask the interviewees to simply tell us their story? We did a bit of both, but mainly the latter. And most of the interviewees were interviewed by one of our trade union members with whom they were familiar so as to make them as relaxed as possible. Unfortunately, some of these relaxed interviews rambled so much as to be difficult to make use of for any practical purpose. Most interviews however leave a great deal for both academic and non-academic readers to think about. Even allowing for the fact that someone being interviewed is engaged in a performance and likely to speak in ways that befit the role that they think they are supposed to be playing, I think that our interviews provide important glimpses into the thinking of Alberta workers who became labour activists and then labour leaders at various levels, if not necessarily into the thinking of Alberta workers as a whole, or even unionized workers as a whole.

Autobiographies of working people can provide a personal side to the stories of both class belonging and class struggle that archival information makes difficult to bring to life. Even in the most freewheeling interviews, we did ask people to describe their early lives and then their experiences of work. While this yields varying amounts of personal information, depending on what an interviewee is willing to disclose, it also tends to reveal ways in which working people who rise within union ranks link their personal stories to that of their class as a whole or at least to workers in a particular sector or firm. So, for example, John Ventura, a union representative, discussing his work at an Edmonton meatpacking plant for over a decade before he became a full-time official, ends up saying very little about himself directly while suggesting a great deal about his and other workers’ attitudes indirectly. Talking about his work at Swifts, he contrasted good and bad supervisors, difficult and easy jobs, cold and hot temperatures that workers contended with in different parts of the plant. New workers were slotted into particular jobs, and if they performed well and stayed long enough, moved up to work that seemed both easier and better remunerated. Many of the jobs were monotonous, but Ventura said of one job, “*it was steady doing the same thing over and over, but you had lots of time to joke around with fellow workers so it wasn’t bad.*”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Alberta Labour History Institute, Interview with John Ventura, Edmonton, November 20, 1999. On the Gainers strike, a pivotal event in Alberta labour history, in which Ventura played a part, see Alain Noël and Keith Gardner, “The Gainers Strike: Capitalist Offensive, Militancy, and the

This was one of many observations about worker sociability in our interviews that were largely in the third person and in which the interviewee simply portrayed themselves as part of the crowd. Similarly, Ventura described the workforce as somewhat segregated by ethnic groupings, though his own relationship to fellow Portuguese workers seems not to have been especially close over a long period of time.

But while sociability on the job was important to Ventura and his fellow workers, they were not simply content to let management manage. They had definite opinions about how the firm was being run, and again Ventura expresses his opinions here as if they are collective rather than personal. Speaking of the poor design of the beef department in the plant, which was closed down in 1991, several years before the plant itself shut down, he noted: “*It got to the point at the end that nothing worked. You’d require sometimes five or six guys at the end and you’d still have to hold up the line because everything would get so congested that it couldn’t be done. ..The very first day they started running, we were laughing, we knew it wouldn’t work. Because they didn’t ask the workers.*”<sup>8</sup>

But not every union leader whom we interviewed thought that employers should be consulting all workers as opposed to union leaders. The ALHI interview with Reg Basken demonstrated a complicated viewpoint on the part of union leaders that has to be understood not only in terms of the intermediary roles that unions play within capitalism but also in the specific context of social class forces in the province and their relationship to the provincial state apparatus. Here is what Basken claims that he told a senior oil company executive in an effort to get a hearing for his union and to discredit the company union that the executive had been supporting so as to keep the union from organizing the company’s workers, and how he later delivered on his promises to that executive.

*I wasn’t very polite to the McMurray Independent Oil Workers. Not at all. I said, they don’t have a concept of what a settlement is. You guys have given so many things to keep the union out over the years, you’ve given crazy things. Do you know that you guys’ insanity went to the extent that if a job became redundant in your mine up there, and somebody wants to stay where they were at their rate of pay, they can do that. But if they choose not to do that, they drop down to a labourer’s rate. But if they choose not to drop down to a labourer’s rate, they stay at their trades rate in a redundant job and play cribbage. Do you know that’s in your collective agreement? You’ve got the kind of stupidity that you’ve got to get rid of. But you offered them so many things to keep them out of the*

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Politics of Industrial Relations in Canada, “*Studies in Political Economy*, 31 (Spring, 1990), 31-72.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with John Ventura.

*union, and they're far higher paid than any other oil worker in Canada.... We got the essence of an agreement worked out, which took away an awful lot of those crazy fringer ideas that were in there that were not in any other collective agreement, and wouldn't have been there if their union had been there. Because we wouldn't have been stupid enough to ask for them. No company would've given them to us. But they gave them to keep the union out. And they were successful for damn near twenty years. But their costs were gone through the roof. The mine at that point was in doubt as to whether it would continue.<sup>9</sup>*

This extraordinary revelation of a union giving up benefits that a company had provided to a company union would almost certainly not have reached the light of day if it was not for the oral history work of ALHI. But what it means is open to both ideological interpretation and historical analysis. For those who regard Canada's or Alberta's labour leaders as divorced from the workers they claim to represent, such a statement of union opposition to too much management generosity and of union leaders' ability to contain their members' demands certainly speaks volumes. In the context of Alberta labour history, however, while that interpretation deserves close attention, matters are more complicated.

Basken is one of Alberta's best known labour leaders and New Democratic Party activists whose activities in the labour movement and the NDP have stretched well over four decades. An activist and then leader in the energy sector, Basken confronted the province's pro-employer labour laws and concomitant determination, particularly during the long Social Credit premiership of Ernest C. Manning, to keep unions out of the profitable oil and gas firms. Outside of a small manufacturing sector, post-war "Fordist labour relations" in Alberta did not follow the model in which employers traded concessions with unions for labour peace, and union leaders acted as whiphands to enforce employer rules that restricted workers' shopfloor rights.<sup>10</sup> Many male workers in the oilfields benefited from a semblance of Fordist relations because of labour shortages. But, of course, the social democratic union leaders in Alberta, looking

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<sup>9</sup> ALHI Interview with Reg Basken, September 2003.

<sup>10</sup> The classic account of the ways in which Fordism operated in Canada, with an emphasis on Ontario, is Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *Consent and Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms, Third Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Their focus is largely on white male production workers. Joan Sangster notes that employers of women and workers of colour largely avoided the classic Fordist accommodation which offered workers job security and decent wages in return for absolute subordination on the job. Women and workers of colour instead experienced low wages, and a lack of job security while being even more subject to exploitation by employers than the white male production workers. Joan Sangster, "'We No Longer Respect the Law': The Tilco Strike, Labour Injunctions, and the State," *Labour/Le Travail*, 53 (Spring 2004), 47-87.

over their shoulders at provinces where unions were expanding their operations, wanted to get a piece of the action. They argued that even if the oil workers received good wages that they lacked the social welfare benefits, occupational safety surveillance, and grievance procedures against harassment as individuals that unionists enjoyed. The employers and Alberta government were mostly unwilling to cooperate.

In the case of oil rig workers, for example, when Basken had signed up a majority, the companies simply shut the rigs down for a few days to scare the workers off from a vote in favour of unionism. This form of intimidation constituted a legal labour practice in Alberta and the Alberta Labour Relations Board had no sympathy for labour's complaints in this regard. The provincial government actively promoted company unions as an alternative to national and international unions with strike funds and a leadership with some independence from the management of the companies with which they negotiated. Gene Mitchell, a long-time labour official in the province, spoke of his efforts to get a union in a plant making commercial fertilizers in Medicine Hat during the mid-1950s.

*They had quite a system worked out. There were certain legal firms in this province that were well connected with the Social Credit government, who were very instrumental in helping form company unions and setting up constitutions... What the company did was plant people right in the plant. They hired people who were, in fact I know some of those people at that time were traveling around from one plant to another, forming company unions.<sup>11</sup>*

The company union would sign a "sweetheart deal" with the firm. In the case to which Mitchell was referring, the workers, including some of those who agreed to become officers of what trade unionists called a "donkey council" eventually became frustrated with the company union and joined a real union. But government-sponsored company unionism stunted the growth of the trade union movement in the province, made a mockery of workers' rights, and no doubt contributed to the majority mindset within the union movement that explains a rant by a leading trade unionist to company officials about them needing a real union to deal with allegedly overpaid, underworked oilsands workers who were driving the company into bankruptcy. So, while I think that many academics would nonetheless regard Basken's attitude as a reflection of a Fordist wannabe cooperator with capital, it is perhaps unsurprising that unionists with whom I've discussed the quotation and who know Basken see nothing of the kind. Here I

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<sup>11</sup> ALHI Interview with Gene Mitchell, October 2002.

present Basken's quotation as worthy of deeper analysis about the ways in which the operations of the capitalist system and the state limit the worldviews and goals of labour leaders. But how far can I go in raising the same issue within the work of ALHI? Only so far. The following paragraph from one of my chapters in *Working People in Alberta: A History*, essentially an ALHI production, does indeed raise the issue, mentioning various perspectives just as I do here. But the language that I employ in the book does pull punches:

ECWU leader Reg Basken's description of the contracts negotiated by the Independent Oil Workers at Suncor indicates the surprising number of worker-friendly concessions that a company union in a tight labour market might sometimes win from an employer desperate to keep out real unions. His description also suggests a degree of pragmatism that some might view as conservatism on the part of certain senior union leaders. Basken certainly felt that the Independent Oil Workers went too far in getting good things for their members to the point where their contracts threatened the viability of Suncor's operations. Speaking of a discussion with a senior executive of Suncor, Basken recalls the lengths to which one company went to keep unions out:<sup>12</sup>

### **Reminiscences of Community**

If the interviews do not speak for themselves regarding the complicated relations of union leaders and members, they also do not speak for themselves with regards to how working-class communities operated. Throughout most of the interviews with workers and their family members from coal-mining communities, pulp mill communities, construction work crew communities, etc., there are constant efforts on the part of interviewees to suggest that working-class communities pulled together, with everyone helping each other out, and that was how they survived. Certainly many examples that interviewees give of sociability, reciprocity, and unity against the class enemy ring true. But one often is suspicious that some less savoury aspects of these communities are not being discussed at all or are being understated. However, if one digs deep enough into all of the interviews, it is possible to pull out certain nuggets that demonstrate that working-class communities were not always harmonious.

Jan Tarasoff, the daughter of a Communist coal miner in the Drumheller area, joined the majority of our miner and mining family interviewees in focusing on how communities pulled together in times of adversity. When their family

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<sup>12</sup> Alvin Finkel, "The Boomers Become the Workers: Alberta, 1960-80," in Alvin Finkel et al, *Working People in Alberta: A History* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 156.



home burned down and they were forced to move temporarily to her uncle's house, noted Tarasoff:

*....it was the coalminers in Drumheller who got together and had a huge shower in the Newcastle Hall and supplied us with absolutely everything we needed for that house, except the big pieces of furniture...Nobody had insurance. Couldn't afford it, for one thing. The community was there for everybody. That was part of my dad's philosophy and most of the people who were active in the union there, who were just active in the community.*<sup>13</sup>

But probed a bit further, Tarasoff, while trying to defend the community in which she grew up, admits that there was ethnic strife within the community, and that each ethnic group generally stuck to its own people. As for the broader small-town community, its prejudices became evident when the mine closed in 1956 and Jan's parents sought work. Because of her family's activism, no small business was willing to hire either of her parents, and the family had to leave the Drumheller area altogether.

Another interviewee went much further than Jan Tarasoff in revealing the dark corners of community life in the Drumheller area mining communities, and the limits to the community being "there for everybody." Joyce Avramenko, a coal miner's wife, was part of a group of interviewees who were recalling memories of their former community. While Avramenko initially mainly focused, as did the rest, on the community's cohesion, at a certain point she demurred from the nostalgia of the others to note:

*But it was very common to see women walking around with blackened eyes and bruises. You knew what had happened, but people just took it as part of what life was. It wasn't all men like that, but some men were very cruel to their wife and children. These poor families walked around with black eyes and bruised cut faces. They were just very brutal, violent men and that's the way it was. People would give the women support, we feel sorry for you, or try to help doctor her up. But no one really stepped in and stopped it. In that day and age every man's home was his own, and you didn't enter it or change things.*

*A woman that was beaten, if she went to the neighbour he'd just beat her when she came back more than ever...Some sides of it wasn't a pretty life. There was a lot of gambling for the young ones, even for some of the*

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<sup>13</sup> ALHI Interview with Jan Tarasoff, Calgary, March 2003.

*married ones. And there was a few houses of ill repute. Times haven't changed, men cheated on their wives.*<sup>14</sup>

Avramenko's recollections, in my view, emphasized the gendered character of many of the reminiscences that we were collecting. Male coalminers perhaps believed that talking about the brutality towards women and children that Avramenko spoke about might make the destruction of those communities appear less tragic. Or, just as likely, they regarded such family brutality as so commonplace as not to be worth discussing. In any case, the absence of such stories in their recollections contributed to the creation of a mythology about working-class communities as places where communitarian values and a rough equality of all triumphed over the implicit capitalist and patriarchal values that characterized Canadian society more generally. There's no point faulting the interviewees who did not mention unsavoury facts about their communities. But it is important to point out how common the failure to mention the darker side of community life is, and not to assume that, as in this case, someone will always emerge within the oral history stream to put things right. Often, a broader set of sources would be needed to determine whether the common narratives that oral history interviews produce provide the complete picture of a working-class community or indeed that of any social class, ethnic, or other type of community.

Nor, in my view, is there any great desire on the part of ALHI or similar organizations to play up the brutality that was often the lot of many women and children in working-class communities.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that our goal is to incite workers to take ownership of a history of which they can be proud and make use of to create greater social justice in the present, there is no great desire to emphasize such unfortunate facts as the brutality towards women and kids that Avramenko reveals. Similarly, the racism towards non-whites that pervaded all of society, and from which working-class communities, other than perhaps those where communists predominated, were not exempt, is often underplayed. It does come up in our interviews with non-white workers, but rarely gets a mention from white workers.

Perhaps nonetheless we were lucky to get even one interviewee to break the silence on a "personal" issue such as family violence. Other oral historians have found a similar reluctance to speak of brutality within the home, and especially sexual violence. Stacey Zembrzycki, interviewing working-class Ukrainians in Sudbury about their memories of boarders in their homes when they were children, found that her interviewees, both male and female, offered little on the issue of sexual tension between boarders and young women. She had to find

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<sup>14</sup> ALHI Interview with Joyce Avramenko, Edson, Alberta, August 2003.

<sup>15</sup> So, for example, our book, *Working People in Alberta: A History*, fails to make use of the Avramenko quotation or otherwise to raise this issue.

information on that subject in the written record. “Instances of boarders guilty of sexually assaulting the girls with whom they lived can be found within the written record even if they were not reported by my informants.”<sup>16</sup>

The discrepancies among worker interviewees, when they emerge, though they sometimes sit only in the interstices of interviews, force the historian to decide who among them is telling greater truths. Should the minority voices get only minority attention? In my view, this complicates immensely the issue of who “they” are when we refer to a set of interviewees. Does a social class, such as workers, speak with one voice or many? That issue is sometimes downplayed in otherwise wise reflections on the question of how we should view our interviewees in oral history, such as this one by Steven High (emphases in the quotation are mine):

In our effort to understand the past, we tend to place our evidence into nicely labeled boxes. We impose order on disorder, teasing out meaning from our sources. As an oral historian, I find it equally important to understand how people define *themselves* and those around them. How would *they* organize the past and label those boxes? How would *they* frame the story being told?<sup>17</sup>

### **Sharing Authority or Being Used?**

Many oral historians note that their work shares authority with the tellers of the stories. That’s true but misleading or at least imprecise: when historians produce work based in whole or in part on oral history materials, their approach determines the extent to which it is the interviewee or the historian who is getting the last word. If the historian is really just a cipher who makes use of nothing other than the interviews that they have recorded, and doesn’t analyze those interviews to find internal contradictions within individual interviews or contradictions across interviews, then indeed all authority belongs to the interviewees. But professional historians virtually never cede authority to that extent. My suggestion in the previous section that Joyce Avramenko’s revelations about working-class life in Drumheller deserve special attention can be portrayed as sharing authority with this interviewee. And certainly if she had not spoken up, I could not focus so much attention on the issue of how women and children were treated by coal miners. But it is just as easy to argue that if I really wanted to share authority with ALHI interviewees more generally that I should be

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<sup>16</sup> Stacey Zembrzycki, “There Were Always Men in Our House: Gender and the Childhood Memories of Working-Class Ukrainians in Depression-Era Canada,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 60 (Fall 2007), 96.

<sup>17</sup> Steven High, “What Can ‘Oral History’ Teach Us?,” *Active History* (March 2011).

underplaying her charges for which no one else breathed even a hint. I made the decision as an historian to accept her charges and emphasize them because they fit in with my understanding, based on historical literature, of how women and kids were treated in Canadian society in the period in question. She made these charges publicly within a group of interviewees, and no one contradicted her though no one wanted to confirm what she had to say either. But ultimately I think that the suggestion that I am “sharing authority” hides the fact that I am, in fact, using the oral history as one of only several means of getting at what I, not my interviewees, consider the truth. Further, I am privileging certain pieces of the oral history that seem to confirm other evidence, from other sources, that I have seen on the issues in question or perhaps that simply confirm my own prejudices.

But if I am insisting on being the arbiter here of competing discourses from mining community interviewees, the fact is that within ALHI, I sometimes have made other choices. An example is the Celanese Edmonton Workers’ Commemoration Project, which was conceived in the last days of operation of the Celanese plant in Fort Saskatchewan, once the leading petrochemical plant in the Edmonton region. The City of Edmonton had been chosen by the federal government as the 2007 Cultural Capital of Canada, an opportunity for a variety of groups to get funding for projects that the city and the federal government were willing to label as “cultural.” Thanks to the efforts of a group of progressive people in the city’s arts community, the city had agreed to establish a modest fund called “Voices Less Heard,” meant to fund projects that linked the arts community and popular groups.

ALHI partnered with the union to which the Celanese workers had belonged, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, to propose a history of the Celanese plant from the workers’ perspective. I conceived this largely as a social history project. It would lead to a DVD that could be used both by the unions and the broader community to learn about the history of a plant and jobs about to disappear from the province. The grant request would allow us to pay individuals to administer the project, arrange interviews, video the interviews, transcribe them, and prepare the DVD. The union representatives with whom we spoke agreed that rank-and-file interviews should form the core of the work for the project. But the union representatives wanted something more to emerge from this work than workers’ nostalgia and whatever themes might recur from their reminiscences. Instead they wanted a glorification of a Fordist-era plant in a largely non-Fordist province, a plant that had provided steady jobs at good pay within a given community that in turn allowed workers to form middle-class households (in terms of consumption) and to participate in a broad range of community activities.

The objective of such a narrative was to condemn the hollowing out of the Alberta economy outside of the area of resource extraction. Manufacturing

operations are largely leaving for the countries of the global South where workers are paid far less than in the North. From the unions' point of view, it is necessary to oppose this unbalancing of the provincial economy, which will no doubt have a long-term disastrous impact on working people in the province, particularly after the petroleum resource is exhausted or proves too environmentally damaging in the oilsands area to continue. In their view, which I share, the willingness of the provincial government to allow resource extraction firms to export their product rather than forcing them to upgrade within the province both deprives the province of good jobs and creates the illusion, easily maintained when construction jobs in the oilfields are paying high wages, that a one-industry province is sustainable in the long run.

I incorporated this narrative into our grant application along with the social history materials. But in the end, the union narrative ended up overtaking everything else for the simple reason that delving into all aspects of the company's dealings with its workers and with their communities could too easily blemish the social-democratic narrative and solutions that the union proposed. That narrative worked best if little or nothing was said about the employer exploiting workers or providing a dangerous work environment and contaminating a huge area around the plant.

But the triumph of the union's narrative was not something that they directly imposed upon ALHI. Rather it was the subtle result of a confluence of factors. First of all, we were largely dependent on the union to encourage workers to agree to be interviewed. It held up its part of the bargain, but not unsurprisingly, the people who proved willing to be interviewed were those who were friends of the union officials or who had been most active in the union. In a plant where most workers were production workers, a disproportionate number of our interviewees had been lab workers, people with post-secondary education and higher status and salary than most other members of the union. Of even greater concern, only two of our 31 interviews were with women. Yet women had comprised half the labour force at certain periods and every single one of them worked in the cigarette toh area, which we learned was the worst place to work in the plant from the point of view of labour intensity and the physical work environment (you breathed in chemicals all day long), and not surprisingly, given the gendered nature of distribution of work in the plant, the area with the lowest-paying jobs. No one in the union, it should be emphasized, discouraged women from speaking to us. The disproportionate willingness of men to be interviewed was consistent with the greater willingness generally of higher-paid, more educated, more union-involved workers to grant an interview. Could we have insisted on interviewing more women and people of colour? Perhaps, but considering that the interview team had no direct link to the Celanese workers, we

would be courting disaster if we challenged the union's thoroughness in attempting to get a cross-section of workers to speak to us?<sup>18</sup>

Our main informant about the rougher conditions faced by the women was a worker whose ex-wife had also worked at the plant, and whose work experiences diverged from his own. He suggested that one of the reasons that other men who worked in the plant did not comment about the women's work was that the plant was physically segregated between its various units. Because of the dangers in a chemical plant, workers in each unit stayed pretty much within narrow physical boundaries and only rarely—perhaps to assist during a fire—would venture into another area.

Nonetheless, what emerged from the interviews was far more than just nostalgia for a supposedly happy workplace providing good money and allowing male-headed working-class families to be part of a larger working-class community with strong middle-class overtones in consumption patterns and preferred activities, though we got plenty of that. Though the men's jobs at Celanese, unlike the women's, were largely performed in clean environments, there was a constant danger of explosions that put huge amounts of poisonous chemicals into the air. The company, it was made clear, was pretty lax in preventing explosions and in cleaning up the air when they occurred. The union seems to have been constantly struggling to win changes in this area, and while they had some successes, these proved short-lived. In the area of physical safety, there seems to have been only a short period of even the Fordist era in this plant when workers could feel reasonably safe while on the job. The men, unlike the women, were not doing jobs that were assembly-like and they had lots of time to kibbitz; but danger always loomed and many of our interviewees mentioned incidents when real crises developed.

Apart from the danger that the environment within the plant presented to workers' health, several interviewees commented, without our asking, on the plant's completely anti-environmental practices of dumping chemical residues into the river and into the lands surrounding the plant. Workers felt that the environment of the communities in which they lived had always been affected by the environmental irresponsibility of the company and would continue to be affected by it for years after the plant's closing. There was an implicit suggestion that the Fordist bargain traded the workers' health for jobs and pay, and that the union had never raised the company's environmental policy as a serious issue.

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<sup>18</sup> Books on Communications, Energy and Paperworkers and its predecessors, in common with books on other unions, that rely on interviews, also tend to over-represent the views of white male leaders. This is particularly true of Wayne Roberts, *Cracking the Canadian Formula: The Making of the Energy and Chemical Workers Union* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990). There is somewhat more diversity in Jamie Swift, *Walking the Union Walk: Stories from the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003).

Workers were angry that the company, by shutting down, had dropped its side of the bargain whereas the workers, who remained residents in the communities outside the plant, could not walk away from the consequences of the company's pollution.

Nevertheless, this group of largely male, white, skilled and semi-skilled workers were largely willing, without much prompting, to focus upon and reinforce the union narrative that maintaining companies like Celanese in the Edmonton region should be a key goal of government policies. They regarded jobs at Celanese as preferable to better-paying construction jobs, which were becoming plentiful in Alberta because of expanded oilsands development, because most meant out-of-town work and unpredictable hours, both factors working against family and community life, and certainly preferable to largely low-paying service jobs. They believed that their union had won significant concessions from Celanese in the areas of both wages and working conditions and they felt that governments should have intervened to prevent the company from simply taking its jobs to countries where workers were more easily exploited and where environmental policies replicated those in Alberta during the Fordist era. It was clear to me that most of our interviewees, even if they had mentioned the company's exploitative practices briefly, were not looking to have ALHI use their experience to present an anti-capitalist critique. They accepted the economic and political systems in which they lived but wanted those systems to be tweaked so that firms like Celanese could not abandon communities that had become dependent on them.

Ultimately the DVD that we produced followed the union narrative closely.<sup>19</sup> While we included excerpts from the workers that mentioned some of the negative impacts of the company, the overall message of the DVD, like that of the workers whom we interviewed, was social democratic and emphasized the positives of having the company in their community. While the interviewees, the union, and the interviewees together were responsible for producing a particular message, I think that oral history as a method contributed to our inability to provide a more clearly anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal framework for our story. "Sharing authority," in this case, meant that we foreclosed upon more radical interpretations of the history of the Celanese plant that might have suggested that the closing of the plant was simply the last stage in a capitalist history of oppression of workers in the plant.

In short, our DVD, while an effective piece of propaganda about the loss of manufacturing in Alberta thanks to corporate and government policies, and a faithful enough reflection of what our interviewees told us, is shallow. And part of the shallowness comes from the willingness in this case, unlike my discussion of

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<sup>19</sup> Alberta Labour History Institute, "Shutdown at Edmonton Celanese: The Workers' Story," DVD, 2008.

the coal miners above, not to make a big deal of the minority revelations among our interviewees that in fact, while having an employer such as Celanese had some advantages and was better than having no plant, that the company was in fact exploitative, environmentally irresponsible, and sexist all along. I don't apologize for that shallowness. I don't feel that I always have to wear my historian's hat, and refuse to join in reformist political campaigns, which seem to have a worthy enough goal in mind, just because their analysis lacks historical depth. But when I put my historian's cap back on, I can't in conscience pretend that I don't see a lack of historical depth in the DVD and with its limitations on what sort of future a group lacking that depth might plan for itself.

I find that the narratives of other oral histories of shutdowns share this limited social democratic retrospective that flattens histories of class oppression and class struggle into histories of working-class communities, working closely with an employer, and creating middle-class lives for the workers, all of which comes crashing down when the plant closes.<sup>20</sup> While it is important to use oral history to establish how the workers in hindsight view the loss of their employment and how they reconstruct their experiences of work in the lost place of work, other means are necessary to fully tell the story of the context of the workers' lives. They are indeed the experts in the telling of what they now think about their pasts, but I think it is wrong to write off as elitism scholars' efforts to make use of other sources about those pasts and to use broader historical and theoretical literature to try and fully reconstruct workers' lives under capitalism.

That question of what to emphasize in workers' accounts of a company shutdown causes me to be quite suspicious of Steven High's eloquent recent putdown of Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott for their over-stated, but yet almost certainly objectively correct, analysis of the ways in which the disappearance of a company and with it the social and economic securities that it provides causes workers to reinterpret their past working lives with the company. Writes High:

And yet there is also a danger in middle class academic audiences assuming that the warm memories of working people are *nothing but* nostalgia. This, too, serves to depoliticize—and to effectively silence a group of already marginalized men and women. At its worst, it belittles working people's attachments to their work and to their cultural worlds. In their recent introduction to *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of*

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<sup>20</sup> Steven High, "Placing the Displaced Worker: Narrating Place in Deindustrializing Sturgeon Falls, Ontario," in *Placing Memory and Remembering Place*, ed. James Opp and John C. Walsh (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 159-186, falls into this category. But I would stress that High's essay, and indeed all of his work, has a great deal of historical nuance. None of it could be judged as simplistic political propaganda in the way that the Celanese DVD can be.



*Deindustrialization*, for example, Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott called on labour historians to avoid smokestack nostalgia: ‘we have to strip industrial work of its broad-shouldered, social-realist patina and see it for what it was: tough work that people did because it paid well and was located in their communities.’ The message, here, it seems, is that to say that work typically meant *more* to industrial workers than this bleak happenstance is to deal in ‘broad-shouldered, social realist’ image-making. I strongly disagree. Let’s now turn to the plant shutdown stories told by Sturgeon Falls paper workers.<sup>21</sup>

I think that High gets this wrong. It is his approach that depoliticizes workers because it makes the error, usual for historians, of assuming that people want to or should want to talk about the past as past. Workers are naturally more interested in finding messages from their past that might lead them to a better future. There’s no reason why they should consent to an historian’s self-indulgent desire for interviewees to focus on the past. So it’s hardly surprising that the interviews that ALHI and other interviewers do with workers who have recent organizing or strike experience focus on how rotten the employers are, while shutdown interviews focus by contrast on how bereft the workers feel about their loss and their community’s loss. While Cowie and Heathcott also err in referring to “smokestack nostalgia,” which implies that workers, like many historians, can only look backwards, it’s important to recognize that at a time when workers are mourning the loss of livelihoods and communities, one is going to be very lucky indeed to get anyone to talk about such issues as company exploitation, the impacts of the company’s operations on worker and community health, or the incidence of violence within families and communities. After High expresses his disagreement with Cowie and Heather, he thinks it is perfectly normal to “now turn to the plant shutdown stories.” That’s fine if one’s focus is purely on how the workers felt about the shutdown. It’s problematic if one wants to construct what life in the plant or the community was actually like from interviews with workers at a time when they feel most vulnerable and see a bleak future staring at them.

### **From Oral History to a Book**

ALHI transcribes all the oral history interviews that it undertakes and posts them on its website ([labourhistory.ca](http://labourhistory.ca) , [laborhistory.ca](http://laborhistory.ca)—yes, both domains were unclaimed when we inquired in the early 2000s!). So, anyone is free to make use of our interviews in whatever way they believe is best. But, as the previous section on the Celanese DVD suggests, we also attempt to interpret our interviews

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<sup>21</sup> Steven High, “Placing the Displaced Worker,” 163.

as a group, without impinging on the rights of anyone inside or outside ALHI from coming to their own conclusions. In 2009, we came to an agreement with the Alberta Federation of Labour to work together to produce a variety of “deliverables” for the centennial of the Fed in 2012. The result was called Project 2012, and involved a partnership of the two organizations to produce a book, DVDs, booklets, posters, and a conference. For the AFL, there was some risk in working with an independent group, made up mainly of volunteers with no obligations to the Fed to hew to a particular line. But they lacked the human and financial resources to produce these materials on their own. In turn, there was a risk for ALHI that it might be pressured to provide an “official line” within its materials. But while we had many volunteers willing to do much of the labour history work without pay, we didn’t have the funds to support work that did have to be contracted to individuals, to purchase equipment, to travel to do interviews, to do transcripts, and to publicize Project 2012 work. The two organizations had sufficient mutual respect to take the risks involved and I think that the results have been excellent. While I was involved in many of the projects, my major responsibility was to coordinate and serve as principal author and editor for *Working People in Alberta: A History*. The book is intended not as a history of the AFL as such but rather, as its title implies, of working people in Alberta collectively. Our oral history collection is the basis for much of the book, but we also made use of archival sources and the existing secondary literature.

Of course, the two can contradict one another, and I must admit that even though I am deeply involved in oral history collection, I believe that where there are archival sources available and there is reason to believe that the archival sources on an issue are reasonably complete, I tend to favour them over oral testimonies collected years after the events in question. While I appreciate Alessandro Portelli’s explanation of why workers, even collectively, might get a particular fact wrong and that their reinterpretation of events teaches us a great deal about their thinking in general,<sup>22</sup> it does not follow for me that simply allowing that misinterpretation to stand as fact is acceptable. I had an early experience of oral history collection that strengthened this view. In 1984, I interviewed Elmer Roper, a venerable figure in the labour movement and the CCF in Alberta and mayor of Edmonton from 1959 to 1963. Apart from his leading roles within the Alberta Federation of Labour and his leadership of the Alberta CCF from 1942 to 1955, Roper had been the editor of labour and social democratic weekly newspapers in Edmonton continuously from 1919 to 1953. I had read every issue of these newspapers. When I interviewed Roper, he was 90 and sharp as a tack. He had some colourful anecdotal stories to tell. At one point, however, as he was describing battles in the CCF in the 1950s between pro-Soviet

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<sup>22</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastelli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

and anti-Soviet factions, he commented that he had never seen any good in the Soviet Union. I commented, “*except in the 1930s.*” “*Absolutely not,*” he said; “*I was never fooled by the stories of no unemployment in Russia, great social programs, and all that.*” “*With all due respect,*” I told him, “*I’ve recently read all your editorials from the 1930s about the Soviet Union and you were quite positive about their achievements, though you deplored the lack of parliamentary institutions.*” “*You may know more about me than I do,*” he said kindly. Unfortunately, on that particular issue it was true. He had allowed his Cold War views of the Soviet Union formed after World War Two to be projected back to an earlier period when he had not held such views.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, reminiscences of R.G. Reid, the last United Farmers of Alberta premier, 34 years after he lost the 1935 provincial election in Alberta, focused on the Alberta population’s rejection of the UFA for having joined forces with the CCF. In Reid’s view, Albertans were free-enterprisers who rejected the socialism of the CCF, and although his government was about as far from socialism as any planet is from the sun, he could not persuade them that his government was not in cahoots with socialism. That memory is so detached from the documentary evidence, which is abundant, that, in my view, this piece of oral evidence does not constitute an interesting reminiscence worthy of further exploration. It is a piece of self-interested nonsense within a Cold War context from a premier who was rejected for doing nothing to help victims of the depression, people who turned to Social Credit, which initially promised massive state intervention.<sup>24</sup>

So, our sources of oral history needed to be treated with care as well, and were deemed worthwhile only when they either added colour to events already within the literature or when they added events or phenomena that the archival and secondary-source literature either failed to deal with or dealt with too peremptorily.

In both cases, that turned out to be frequently the case. Trade unions in Alberta, as elsewhere, do not generally do a good job of preserving their records. They generally feel embattled in simply dealing with current issues and feel that it is a luxury to save and collate evidence of their past struggles. Newspaper accounts of strikes and other labour actions, meanwhile, not to mention the daily lives of workers, are often short, shallow, and management-oriented. So, without oral histories, many strikes would disappear from public memory altogether, and the stories of what shaped daily life in many working-class communities would be told nowhere. The oral histories collected by ALHI do much to restore workers’ memories of these communities and events, and even if there is reason to be, as

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Elmer Roper, Victoria, February, 1984.

<sup>24</sup> Provincial Archives of Alberta, R.G. Reid Interview, 6 October 1969. On the reasons why the UFA lost the 1935 election, see Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 20-40.

we have suggested, aware of potential biases in such reminiscences, they provide an important corrective to the institutional tendencies, mentioned above, to bury working-class life and struggles altogether.

As principal author and editor of the book, and having had a hand in shaping the themes and issues within its covers, as well as the final wording and what sources of evidence were to be considered credible, I can hardly be viewed as an objective commentator. But I can comment, I think, on the issues that confront engaged scholars (and non-scholars, since several of our authors either do not have backgrounds in academe or have one foot in academe and one foot in the labour movement in terms of their careers) who are producing a book of this kind. Audience is key here. While our goal was to produce an academically credible work with full referencing of our observations and quotations, the audience we most wanted to reach was an audience of working people, especially younger workers without much knowledge of labour's past. But, while neither the AFL nor any union tried in any way to influence what we wrote about or what we said, I think that our product was somewhat affected by the knowledge that we needed to not be too offputting to the labour leaders upon whose goodwill we were depending in order to get publicity for our book within specific unions and its inclusion in labour schools and labour libraries. Certainly, that played a big role in my decision about how to deal with the Basken interview, mentioned above.

Overall, the need to be respectful to our interviewees, some of whom had been rather shy to be interviewed, was paramount. We did not subject anyone's comments to critical discourse analysis though we did at times read more into what an interviewee had to tell us than what they necessarily intended to convey. So, for example, I juxtaposed comments from an interview which pipefitter Jack Hubler gave, in which he mentioned the many gains his union made for its members in the later 1960s, but his own inability to gain much from them because of an industrial accident, to make a point about the trade-offs workers often made between wages and safety, and how it worked for some but worked against others.<sup>25</sup> Hubler had made no such inference; he was merely rhyming off the events that caused him to become a full-time labour official. His personal evidence however fit with what archival sources told us of the period. On the whole, *Working People in Alberta: A History* provides a more critical appraisal of the trade union movement than ALHI's individual interviews or the Celanese DVD. And arguably, this is because the degree of partnership between ALHI and trade unions in producing the book was more token than in our other efforts. This left more scope for placing oral history evidence in a broader context of both theory and historiographical traditions.

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<sup>25</sup> Alvin Finkel et al, "The Boomers," 141.

## Conclusion

The ALHI experience demonstrates, I think, both the advantages and pitfalls of an academic-labour joint community enterprise to collect and disseminate labour histories. The key advantage is that labour officials, past and present, have the connections to find interviewees and make them feel comfortable about being interviewed for posterity. The key disadvantage is that this results in potentially having an unrepresentative group of interviewees (not unrepresentative of labour officials, but unrepresentative of workers as a whole) and the need to insure that interviewees' words are largely taken as they are given and not subjected to much analysis. But the evidence, even from my own experience with ALHI, is mixed on this. The Celanese DVD project largely strikes me as having produced a set of flawed interviews intended to yield a limited, social democratic interpretation of the meanings to be attached to the closing of a plant. By contrast, the book, by focusing on the oral history interviews but making use of archival evidence and secondary materials to locate these interviews in broad contexts, is a rich and critical documentary of the history of Alberta workers. It demonstrates, in my view, that oral history, while offering a great deal in tracing the history of workers, ought not to be divorced from a larger historical project of unearthing the history of working people that requires multiple means.