

# "A Special Breed": Packing Men and the Class and Racial Politics of Manly Discourses in Post-1945 Edmonton, Alberta

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## Abstract

Edmonton's male packinghouse workers mobilized rough and respectable notions of masculinity at the bargaining table during the halcyon days of industrial unionism after World War Two. But on the shop floor and in the union hall their attitudes and behaviour could have a corrosive effect that limited worker activism and class solidarity.

## Résumé

Les ouvriers de la conserverie d'Edmonton ont mobilisé des notions esquissées et respectables de la masculinité à la table de négociation durant les jours de bonheur du syndicalisme industrielle après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Mais sur les planchers et dans les bureaux syndicaux leurs attitudes et leur comportement pouvait avoir un effet corrosif qui limitaient l'activisme du travailleur et la solidarité des classes.

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Steven Benard's job at Canada Packers' Edmonton plant in the 1970s was to hang a fine net shrouding on freshly slaughtered beef carcasses to protect the meat during cooling in the freezer on the beef killing floor - a department where the stench of freshly slaughtered animals was intensified by debilitating heat and humidity. "A lot of people used to come up to me," he recalled in an interview with me nearly thirty years later, and ask, "How could you do that? How could you eat meat after you do this?" His answer was, "you have to be sort of a special breed to do that to begin with, I guess" (Benard 2004).<sup>1</sup> As former Swift Canadian worker Peter Hohlbein, who began working in Swift's Edmonton plant in 1977, explained:

We've had people come in and start at 7 o'clock and by coffee time at 8:30 or 9 o'clock they'd disappear, you wouldn't see them again. The pace of the work. It takes a special breed to be a meat packer, it really does. Because there's people that can't handle the kill floor situation. It is bloody and gory, and in the summer it's 190 degrees inside the kill floor when it's 80 outside. (Hohlbein 1998)

Benard and Hohlbein articulated a common notion of packinghouse men as exceptional because of their ability to tolerate jobs in environments like the killing floor, the rendering plant, the hide house, and

the pickle cellar, where heat and humidity intensified the smells of animal flesh, blood, and excrement. The bodies of workers in some of these departments acquired an odour that was impossible to remove while they worked there daily (Fenton 2004). The notion of being "a special breed" was one way of coping with the stigma often attached to male packinghouse workers because of an assumption that industrial-scale slaughtering and meat processing was dehumanizing (MacLachlan 2001, 222). Norm Leclaire, who worked in Canada Packers' Lethbridge plant briefly and then became a business agent for his union in 1970, remarked many years later that, "It takes a special breed of human being to work in those places...my impression is that they are hardened men that work there" (Leclaire 1995). Leclaire's postsecondary education, his experience as an RCMP officer, and the fact that he was able to leave production work, may help explain why he felt he was different from packing workers (Leclaire 2006).

During the heyday of industrial unionism in the Canadian meatpacking industry, when the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) was able to enforce a national system of pattern bargaining among the Big Three Canadian packing companies - Canada Packers, Swift Canadian, and Burns - good wages and benefits helped dignify the degrading work of slaughtering livestock and processing meat under harsh conditions. Gerry Beauchamp, a former president of the Swift local, captured the pride many workers felt about once being among the highest paid manual workers in the city: "...when I first started there we were the third industry, you know, the top third - so Imperial Oil was first, CPR was second and the packinghouse was third in wages in '52" (Beauchamp 2004). Edmonton packing men's self-image as rough yet respectable working-class men was rooted in a sense of entitlement as male breadwinners, and their ability to negotiate a decent income through union solidarity. But the need to withstand a harsh, competitive work environment and

stand up to the boss meant that it co-existed with a capacity for rough behaviours ranging from profanity and initiation rites to harassment and physical brawls.

These distinctive aspects of identity were central to how male packinghouse workers in Edmonton, the majority of them white ethnic Canadians - most often Ukrainians - understood their subjectivity as working-class men and proud unionists (Swyripa 1993).<sup>2</sup> It is also how they distinguished themselves from women and new immigrants, many of whom were people of colour, particularly by the 1970s, when a major restructuring of the industry deskilled or eliminated many jobs. During this period of rising labour tensions packinghouse men mobilized rough and respectable behaviours effectively at the bargaining table and on the picket line against the combined forces of corporate and state power. On the shop floor and in the union hall, however, their attitudes and behaviour could have a corrosive effect that limited class solidarity by subordinating women and reinforcing ethnic divisions.

In recent years, feminist labour scholars writing gendered histories of workers and the working class, and other scholars of masculinity, have demonstrated convincingly that notions about what it means to be a man have varied across time and space, and that the study of male work and union cultures must consider men's privilege and power (Baron 2006; Connell 1995; Creese 1999; Frager 1993; Heron 2006; Iacovetta 1999). Historians of women and working-class history have revealed key insights about men, male power, and the patriarchal organization of family, politics, capitalist organization, and unions (Guard 1994; Parr 1990; Sangster 1995; Sugiman 1994). A rich literature of packinghouse workers in the United States, among other things, has documented the role and character of UPWA, a leftist union in the post-World War Two period (Halpern 1997; Horowitz 1997; Wilson 2000). As these studies show, UPWA's highly disciplined shop floor militance, political independence, and promotion of racial equality made it exceptional,

although its record on gender discrimination was weak (Deslippe 1994; Fink 1998). In the Canadian context little attention has been paid to the masculinity of male packinghouse workers who, as the opening anecdotes suggest, considered themselves to be "a special breed" among workers (Craig 1964; Grover 1998; MacLachlan 2001; Montague 1950).

This paper examines the nature and role of masculinities on the job in Edmonton packinghouses between 1947 and 1979, when Swift Canadian, Canada Packers, Burns & Company and Gainers Limited each operated a major packinghouse in the city, and a system of national pattern bargaining through the UPWA gave workers considerable power. The period extends from 1947, when a national meatpacking strike established centralized bargaining, to 1979, when the first of a series of plant closures began to shut down the industry in Edmonton.<sup>3</sup> The paper draws most directly on interviews with twelve men, but it is informed by a larger body of forty-seven oral interviews, as well as union records and publications, media reports on labour disputes, and statistics.<sup>4</sup>

Edmonton's more intense and prolonged period of prosperity compared to most other major Canadian cities following large oil and gas discoveries after World War Two makes it a useful setting for exploring how packinghouse masculinities were influenced by increased worker power (Palmer and Palmer 1990, 307). As an important packing centre with four major plants employing nearly 2,500 production workers by the late 1970s, Edmonton had the largest concentration of male unionized packing workers in Alberta, and one of the largest in Canada (Ministry of Trade and Commerce 1980). Edmonton's economic boom also attracted a growing number of people of colour after 1967, when Canada removed most of its overtly racist immigration restrictions (Palmer and Palmer 1985, 42-44). Their presence helped make explicit racialized notions of packinghouse masculinity and femininity operating in Edmonton plants. Finally, Edmonton

packing workers displayed a gendered militance during national contract negotiations in the 1970s in response to Alberta's over-heated economy, which helped make Alberta packing workers the only target of a lock-out by all of the Big Three Canadian packing companies in 1974.

Stephen Meyer provides a useful framework for understanding respectable and rough working-class masculinities as a legacy from the pre-industrial era characterized by responsibility, autonomy, and control, in the case of skilled workers, and a more rugged, aggressive brand of masculinity among unskilled workers that derived from heavy manual labour, engaging in risk, and enduring difficult working conditions. Meyer notes that increasing mechanization during the twentieth century reduced or eliminated skill, worker control, and the need for physical strength in many jobs, making the work of both craftsmen and labourers "unmanly" (Meyer 2001, 16-17). Meyer and others have demonstrated that mass production workers responded to these changes by fashioning new identities that drew on both respectable and rough masculinities (Fine 2004; Freeman 1993; Meyer 2002).

In the Canadian meatpacking industry a major wave of mechanization in the 1960s eroded skill levels, worker autonomy, and the need for physical strength. Shrinking worker control through greater subdivision of the work process and assembly line speed-ups appears to have generated rising levels of worker alienation and frustration. Meat packing was the first industry to master the technique of subdividing jobs on a mechanized disassembly line to reduce management's reliance on costly skilled labour and allow greater control over the pace of work. Line speed has always been crucial in this low-margin industry, which is dependent on large volumes and rapid turnover of an expensive and highly perishable product (MacLachlan 2001, 212). By the 1940s nearly 80% of production jobs were unskilled or semi-skilled, but key parts of the plant operation, such as the beef kill, had not been

automated because of the large and irregular size of cattle, and the delicate and valuable nature of its hide (Labour Canada 1981). One of the most highly paid workers in the plant, the floorsman, removed the cattle hide manually with a knife (MacLachlan 2001, 217-18). Situated at the beginning of the disassembly process, which gave them some control over the pace of work, skilled men on the beef kill were among the most influential workers in the plant and were difficult for management to replace (Horowitz 1997, 19-20).

Men who could haul beef quarters weighing as much as 350 pounds from the loading dock onto railway cars acquired a different kind of prestige. At the Burns plant in the early 1960s Sam Fenton was proud of his ability to shoulder the crushing weight, and casually dismissed the need to wear "women's Kotex pads" (female sanitary napkins) routinely provided by the plant nurse to staunch his bleeding shoulders: "Yeah, after a week, when it healed and the shoulders got toughened up - it was no problem after that." Fenton derived self-respect and considerable satisfaction from the fact that when he eventually left the job his replacement lasted only three days: "...on the third day they put a quarter of beef on his shoulders and he just literally sat right down - he was played out, he couldn't take it. He was too light for that job" (Fenton 2004).

Elimination of jobs like floorsman and lugger, together with speedups, removed important sources of control, pride, and dignity from the workplace for many male workers. In the 1960s the beef kill was put on an overhead rail and a new mechanical hide-puller was introduced, which allowed further subdivision of the butchering process. The job of beef lugger became one of pushing the carcass on a rail rather than lifting it. Other changes in the labour process intensified the pace of work. A variety of air-powered knives, electronic slicers, and packaging machines increased the speed at which workers could perform their tasks. There was a dramatic increase in productivity, particularly in the 1970s when the new processes were well established.

But management's ability to increase the chain speed counteracted any physical relief workers might have experienced by using more effective tools (MacLachlan 2001, 172).

### Subordinating Women

Male workers performed rough and respectable behaviours in ways that afforded them dignity, self-respect, and some degree of control vis à vis management, but these behaviours could also intimidate or marginalize others perceived to threaten male power and privilege. Respectable patriarchal assumptions about working-class men's role as a family breadwinner, as well as men's superior strength, ability, and stamina, justified strategies that excluded, controlled and subordinated women workers. During the immediate postwar period privileged access to jobs for returning veterans, a marriage ban for women only, and the support of local union members and leaders for gendered job segregation and departmental seniority lists, helped reduce the number of women workers from a peak of 29% during the war to 20% by 1948. Their numbers declined again after 1960 as women bore the brunt of layoffs from increasing automation because of gender segregated jobs. Despite the emergence of a new feminist movement, and a dramatic increase in the number of women working for wages, women were reduced to 14% of the workforce by 1979 in the well-paid packing plants (Statistics Canada 1971; 1980).

Work in the packing plants was profoundly gendered. In her studies of mid-western American packing plants, Deborah Fink found that a double sexual standard generated gendered pay rates, and unequal power relations compromised feminine propriety and sexual respectability: "The sexual saturation of the work environment was men's effective way of resisting women's entry into their space. Through their control of women's reputations they were able to retain power in both the worksite and the union locals..." (Fink 1998, 256). Rough male behaviours, particularly packinghouse

language, physical aggression, verbal abuse, and harassment, were vehicles for asserting this control. Many women workers who turned down jobs that involved working with "blood and guts," saying they preferred "clean" jobs, were undoubtedly influenced by the stigma of promiscuity or unfemininity attached to women who accepted "male" work once it was made available in the 1970s.

Gendered assumptions allowed men to dominate the vast majority of jobs, particularly skilled and supervisory positions. Men corralled and slaughtered the livestock and performed the larger cuts in the disassembly process as well as most of the ancillary processes, from preparing the hides to producing lard and rendering any parts of the carcass that remained. Most women worked in the processing part of the plant where table-ready meats such as sausage, wieners and bacon were produced, weighed, packaged, and labeled. Men held the skilled knife positions, which involved cuts to the most valuable parts of the carcass, while women trimmed meat from cheaper parts like the head because it was believed that only men were able to sharpen and wield a knife with skill (Fink 1998, 82). Men also operated most machinery.

The preponderance of east European men in Edmonton's plants, particularly Ukrainians, gave the patriarchal nature of the workplace a distinctly "ethnic" character - although, without future research, it would be inappropriate to simply suggest that Ukrainian workers, whether Canadian-born or post-1945 refugees, necessarily displayed a more deeply conservative gender culture than Anglo-Celtic or other Canadian male workers. What is clear, however, is that local male union leaders' gender assumptions about essential differences between men and women, including men's vaunted ability to withstand harsh conditions, compromised the union's egalitarian principles. During World War Two the union argued that some areas of the packing plant were "not fit for females employment [sic]" in order to protect women from being put on the

heaviest, dirtiest jobs in the absence of adequate numbers of male workers (Hampson 1948a). This policy created a conundrum for local union leaders in the postwar years when an imbalance in the number of male or female jobs occurred. In 1948 some of the female-dominated departments at Burns slowed down and women were laid off before men who had less seniority, while Canada Packers faced the opposite situation (Chrapko 1948; Hampson 1948b). In both cases local union leaders resisted UPWA's formal position of enforcing a single seniority list by supporting gender segregated departments because they assumed that most "male" jobs could not be performed by women and men should not perform jobs considered "female" (Hampson 1948b; Lenglet 1948).

Rough behaviour was another strategy used by some male workers to masculinize the shop floor, although it could backfire - sometimes spectacularly. In the 1950s a male worker in the Casings Department at Swift who yelled at, then struck a woman co-worker who talked back to him, triggering a brawl, was "beaten" in a "pile-up" by other women nearby who leapt to the woman's aid. The man quit his job several days later because of embarrassment, despite an attempt by management to keep the incident quiet. The humiliation he experienced - likely from his male co-workers - from being defeated by women in a physical contest demonstrates how deeply a packing man's masculine pride and dignity were invested in notions of male dominance and superior strength (Stanfield 2004).

#### Enforcing Packinghouse Masculinity

It is difficult to determine whether there was an increase in rough behaviours among packinghouse men during the period under study, because union minutes have not been located for all four plants, or for the years before 1967. But it seems clear that physical and emotional violence were vehicles by which packing men collectively constructed and enforced a hegemonic working-class masculinity that was rough, yet

respectable, white, and heterosexual (Connell 1995, 83-84). Male workers downplayed the significance of altercations, explaining that most physical fights lasted only a few minutes and were never reported, which suggests that union records likely under-represent the behaviours (Beauchamp 2005; Friedman 2005). A physical attack in 1949 at the highest level of the union in Edmonton - a joint meeting of executive members from all four of the city's packing locals - indicates that rough behaviour was an accepted means of intimidation for many workers from the earliest postwar years. President of the Swift local, Stan Solomonson, "viciously struck...down with his fists" a fellow union leader from the Canada Packers plant who was critical of the way Solomonson was running the local, as well as the union's provincial staff representative, who intervened in the attack (Goruk 1949). Despite opprobrium from union officials at the national and international level, Solomonson remained president of his local and was able to find substantial support among its members for a petition to have the union's provincial representative removed from office (Dowling 1952).

Harassment, which could be vicious and persistent, reinforced the rough masculine culture of the packinghouse. A male worker at one Edmonton packinghouse in the 1970s was subjected to teasing, mocking, and jeering over a three-year period. At one point his harasser repeatedly spat on the back of the victim's neck while the man had coffee in the plant cafeteria, and followed him as he moved from table to table to escape his attacker. Mocking questions about "the future President" and "paper stretcher" suggest that the victim's clean dry job making deliveries throughout the plant, combined with a quiet, unassuming and gentlemanly nature, may have made him a target for the abuse. In the grievance record the victimized man could not bring himself to write the word fart, instead writing out "f\_\_t" to describe one of the noises made around him by his harassers

(Friedman 1972; Goruk 1969). Workers who had escaped the most demeaning types of work and who did not conform to rough masculine packinghouse behaviour may have threatened to undermine the shop floor culture that was a source of pride, power, and exclusion for others.

Packing masculinity was also entwined with the relational notion of whiteness, particularly by the late 1970s when an increasing number of people from visible minority groups who began to arrive in Edmonton were able to find work in the city's packing plants because of growing instability in the industry (Palmer 1985, 43-46). The existing workforce dominated by middle-aged, first and second generation Ukrainians, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and German-speaking men, who had only recently become accepted as "white" in Edmonton society, began to feel their power and status as packing workers threatened (Potrebenko 1977, 26). These workers distinguished themselves from new immigrants, particularly refugees, by emphasizing their own willingness to fight through the union for better wages and working conditions, and by representing themselves as protectors of a respectable Canadian standard of living that the newcomers could not uphold because of their impoverished origins. As one worker put it: "The Asians started to come in when there was a two-tier system - when the white man wouldn't work for \$7.50 an hour and the Asians and the Africans and the Punjabs and the East Indians, they would" (Feniak 2004).

Some white ethnic male workers used racist notions about respectability and rough behaviour to distinguish themselves from workers of colour, such as telling jokes, using terms like "nigger," and reinforcing stereotypes. Asked why so few natives or blacks worked in the packinghouse one Ukrainian-Canadian man responded that, in the case of natives, "they go to drink you know" (Huniuk 2004). His comment implicitly contrasted a stereotypical image of natives as morally weak and dissolute with the image of respectable

self-discipline and control that non-native Canadians have cultivated to legitimize the displacement of natives from their land (Carter 1999). A male Ukrainian-Canadian worker disparaged one of the few black men who worked in the packinghouse during his own long career, saying he was "a very nice guy" and "for a black guy he was pretty good looking," but that he told exaggerated "stories" about his sexual exploits and extravagances on trips to exotic cities. This white ethnic packing man saw himself as racially tolerant, but his comments implied the existence of a racial hierarchy within which most blacks are not considered good looking and contrasted the purported hubris and sexual impropriety of black men with, by implication, white male sexual respectability (Boyчук 2004).

Immigration status and sexuality were equally central to male pride, and could be mobilized to score status points in an increasingly competitive and alienating environment. In 1977 a man on the hog trim line at Canada Packers triggered a "fight" when he threatened his co-worker by gesturing at the man's "crotch" with his work knife after being called "a little DP" (Goruk 1977). DP was a derogatory term applied to displaced persons from Europe after World War Two that likely came into use again because of the rising number of refugee immigrants who arrived in Edmonton during the late 1970s, particularly Vietnamese people (Palmer 1985, 445; 451). The offended man's vehement response, "I paid my way," and threat of emasculation, demonstrate the close relationship between class and gender for male packing workers.

Horseplay and initiation rites were forms of rough masculinity that often fostered male bonding and solidarity because they "connected workers in a bond of transgression" that reinforced class and gender divisions (Fine 2004, 136). In a late 1970s waterfight on the killing floor at Canada Packers, the union's ability to reinstate a male co-worker who accidentally drenched a supervisor when aiming for Steven Benard, signaled union strength and earned this worker's respect: "A guy

could soak down a supervisor and get hired back. Well, that's a pretty good union" (Benard 2004). Initiation rites, such as making a new worker do all the heavy lifting, had a similar effect, according to a former worker who was subjected to this rite when he started at Swift in 1969. Twenty years later Dave Mercer explained that this was not "a harmful thing" but "a form of bonding" that allowed veteran workers to size up "new rookies" and see if they could "cut it" in the department, which meant coping with the rough culture of the shop floor and standing up to management (Mercer 1998).

#### Performing Masculinity in the Public Sphere

Throughout the period under study displays of rough and respectable masculinity by Canadian packinghouse workers were an important source of power in negotiations and on the public stage during labour disputes that helped union leaders secure broad worker support and institute a centralized system of bargaining. A brief national wildcat strike in 1945 generated a "myth" of exceptional solidarity among Canadian packing workers, which was reinforced by a successful national strike in 1947 that shut down all of the country's major packing companies for more than two months (Montague 1950, 180). Packing workers' reputation as tough, militant unionists helped them achieve strong contract gains without resorting to a labour dispute until 1966, when labour relations were ruptured by a national strike at Canada Packers plants across the country because of rising tensions from industry restructuring (Labour Canada 1966). The ten-week strike netted substantial contract gains for all Canadian packinghouse workers because of national pattern bargaining (Goruk 1977; List 1966).

But it was during a 1974 labour dispute that Edmonton packinghouse workers and their union leaders - the vast majority of whom were men - displayed a distinctive militance that offers insight into the dominant notion of masculinity that operated in city

packinghouses during the era of national bargaining. That year Alberta workers were singled out by all three of Canada's biggest packing companies in a province-wide lock-out because they "almost unanimously" rejected the contract offer that was accepted in a national vote by a majority of packing workers across the country (Leclaire 1995). Alberta workers' greater expectations and militance resulted largely from the province's booming oil-based economy. In an interview more than thirty years later the union's Alberta spokesman during the strike, Norm Leclaire, explained, "In the '70s we had some particular problems. That was one of our oil booms going on and Jesus the pressure was on to push wages higher and higher...pressure from our members." Leclaire said Alberta workers' distinctive militance was driven largely by the need to keep up with their neighbours: "You knew what job your neighbour did and he didn't work nearly as hard as you and you wanted to make as much money as he did" (Leclaire 2006). Comparing themselves with men in other industries reveals the extent to which male packing workers' respectability was invested in earning a decent wage.

Edmonton workers seemed to draw masculine pride from their economic power as the largest meatpacking centre in the province, and from the West's role in the packing industry nationally. In an interview three years after the 1974 strike, Edmonton's Canada Packers union president Alex Goruk used gendered imagery to help explain the higher level of militance among Alberta workers and their delegates at negotiations by implicitly depicting Alberta packing workers as more masculine than their Canadian counterparts "down east": "...we have a little more muscle than the others. We kill more hogs and cattle than any other given province. We slaughter an awful lot. Canada Packers with four plants in Alberta, you know, you have a lot of muscle" (Goruk 1977). Significantly, men performed more of the slaughtering work in the industry, while women performed much of

the lighter meat processing work, most of which occurred in Central Canada, particularly Toronto.

During the halcyon days of industrial unionism in the Canadian meatpacking industry, good wages and benefits helped dignify the work of slaughtering livestock and processing meat under harsh conditions in Edmonton's four packinghouses. Male workers fashioned a sense of masculine pride in themselves as "a special breed" because of their ability to cope with the most disturbing and oppressive areas of the packing plant where few women worked, even after women gained access to those jobs in the 1970s. Edmonton packing men displayed a range of rough and respectable behaviours during the era of national bargaining, which helped them cope with the indignities of the shop floor and effectively press contract claims at the bargaining table. But, by subordinating women and reinforcing ethnic divisions, this dominant notion of packing manhood also limited women's activism and weakened working-class solidarity.

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#### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Kathryn McPherson, Franca Iacovetta, Denise Challenger, and Margot La Rocque for their suggestions while this paper was being drafted and to the anonymous reviewers of *Atlantis*.

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#### Endnotes

1. Interview with author, Edmonton, 6 June 2004 (pseudonym). I elected to use pseudonyms for all but the better-known or high-profile labour leaders I interviewed. Pseudonyms are indicated in the bibliography by an asterisk (\*). I used actual names for workers identified in transcripts of interviews made available courtesy of Alberta Labour History Institute (available at: [www.labourhistory.ca](http://www.labourhistory.ca)), the Provincial Archives of Alberta, and Ian MacLachlan.
2. The term "ethnic" as defined by Frances Swyripa, encompasses Canadians whose cultural heritage is



non-British and non-French, but it does not include aboriginal Canadians (1993, ix).

3. The Burns plant, the south-side Gainer plant, and the Canada Packers plant were closed between 1979 and 1984. The Swift plant, which changed hands numerous times after 1979, closed during a strike in December, 1997.

4. My interviews with twenty-three men and twenty-four women between May 2004 and November 2006 were central to the study. Seventeen of the men were former Edmonton packing workers and union members, two men worked primarily as foremen, two were office workers and one was a provincial union staff officer. One additional rank and file male worker's attitudes and behaviour were explored posthumously through an interview with his wife and son. The study was also informed by the transcripts of interviews conducted with sixteen male unionized Edmonton workers conducted by others. Interview candidates were found through a local union office and through a notice posted in Edmonton libraries, churches, and cultural centres, using a snowball approach. Union activists, those who worked in the local industry for more than twenty years, those with a Ukrainian heritage and Canadian-born workers were disproportionately represented among the men and women interviewed because of the difficulties inherent in finding immigrants whose first language is not English, and those who worked in the industry briefly. Interviews were conducted with open-ended questions about the workplace, family and community.

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