
LESTER DEEP

Date and place of birth (if available): 1940

Date and place of interview:

Name of interviewer: Peter McKenzie-Brown

Name of videographer: Peter Tombrowski

Full names (spelled out) of all others present:

Consent form signed: Yes

Transcript reviewed by subject:

Interview Duration:

Initials of Interviewer: PMB

Last name of subject: DEEP

PMB: I'm talking to Lester Deep.

DEEP: That's right.

PMB: And, you were a supervisor in what area?

DEEP: In the final extraction, Plant 4.

PMB: In the extraction plant.

DEEP: It was final extraction, because Gerry was in the primary extraction which was Plant 3 and I was in Plant 4.

PMB: Gerry is what you called Germain?

DEEP: Yes, okay. That's what everybody called him, Gerry, yeah.



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PMB: Well, I'm going to quickly review what I would like you to do. Can you tell me a little bit about your background? Your personal history and then how your career developed. So, that would be before you started with Suncor and then I'm going to ask you some questions about how things changed and certain people that you might've remembered. So, tell me a little bit please about your personal history.

DEEP: Well, I guess when we first arrived into Waterways it was 1941 right and I was a year old at that time. We came from Lac La Biche, just south of Lac La Biche on the farm. And, my dad came up to work. Well, he came ahead of us and he came up to work in the sawmills to start with, because unfortunately...

PMB: Right here at Fort McMurray?

DEEP: Actually, it was in Draper.

PMB: Which is nearby? Okay.

DEEP: Yes. Unfortunately, my sister had started a little fire under the chesterfield at home and burned the farmhouse down. So, that's the reason why we came up here I guess. And, my father worked at various things. He owned a restaurant and then he owned a grocery store. He also worked for the American Army when they were up here; that's quite a few years back.

PMB: That would've been to build the...

DEEP: Duline, yeah.

PMB: Oh, the Duline. Oh, really? Okay.

DEEP: I'm sure that's what that was for anyways, if my memory serves me right.

PMB: What year were you born by the way?

DEEP: 1940. And, I came here in 1941. And of course, there's this Deep Road which is up in Thickwood named after our family. And, I did work at various different jobs. One of my first jobs was on the tug boats. I worked for McInnis Fisheries up and down the Athabasca River across Lake Athabasca where they had their fish camp set up. And, I used to bring the fish back up all in the refrigerated barges and then they'd ship it on to various areas. I'm not exactly sure where it all went to, but it was all frozen by the time it was up here; it was all frozen in. They loaded it into box cars and



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at that time they didn't have refrigerated box cars. They use to pack the box cars with ice and that's how they transported it out of here.

PMB: We're probably talking about the late 50s here? Is that right?

DEEP: Yeah. Well, that first trip I was down in Fort Chip was 1958 and I was 18 years old then. But, I did work at the airport, Fort McMurray Airport for a while with my brother-in-law there; not actually with him, but I worked up there as a Civil Agent. I looked after the single men's dorm and the area manager's office. That lasted for a couple years. Then, I went to work for Northern Transportation as a freight checker.

PMB: As a what?

DEEP: Freight checker. Like, the freight used to come into Fort McMurray by rail and then it was all shipped north by barges. I used to check that off.

PMB: Just check to see that they arrived and it went forward?

DEEP: Well, and it had to go to specific areas. So, you had to make sure that you got the right stuff going to the right area, stuff like that. What else?

PMB: And then, at some point you ended up at Suncor?

DEEP: Yeah, well I worked on the construction of the plant first with Canadian Bechtel.

PMB: Oh, really?

DEEP: Yes. I actually worked on the cement crew and that was quite a job.

PMB: So, did you kind of learn cement work on the job, or?

DEEP: Not really, because we're just placing the cement more than anything else. We were pouring the floors and the pillars and stuff.

PMB: So, it was sort of grunt work almost?

DEEP: That's right. After that, I went for an interview with GCOS which is Great Canadian Oil Sands and I got on with them. We went through a training period and



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finally got into the plant. I got into the plant as a trainee and I worked my way up from a trainee up to unit leader, which is right underneath the supervision. Well, it's the same thing as supervision I guess, but I was still in the union. Of course, supervision is not in the union. I worked there since... from...well, let me see...

PMB: About what year was it that you became a unit leader?

DEEP: 1979. Then I worked there from... October 1st '98 was when I retired. But, during that period of time I graduated from trainee up to pump floor operator. Or, no I guess it was a trainee to bird... No, I went three different places anyway. I went from trainee to Westfalia tech, from Westfalia to bird floor operator, then pump floor operator.

PMB: Okay. Now, there are some things that I didn't understand there. I thought I heard you say Westfalia tech? What does that mean?

DEEP: Well, well there are three positions on that particular floor and I was in the lowest position when I first started. Then, I worked my way up to senior tech. And then, from senior tech I went down and trained on the control board. And then, after I trained on the control board for a period of time I became a board operator. And then, I was upgraded periodically to a unit leader. Say one of the divisional unit leaders was off on holidays or something like that and they were short of people and they couldn't bring anybody in? So, they'd just move me up to that position. And then, finally in 1979 I became a unit leader. There were six people working under me, which was good. Then we had a bit of an expansion. We had a naptha recovery unit put into place (that was what we diluted the bitumen with). We got the raw bitumen from Plant 3 and then we had a slipstream of naptha coming into the bitumen that went into Plan 4, where I worked. Everything went through Plant 4 first of all. I guess it went from the first stage pump area to the bird centrifuges, from the bird centrifuges into the second stage tank. And, from the second stage tank it went through a set of Cuno filters and from the Cuno filters it went up to the Westfalia separators. And, there were five cartridges in each Cuno.

PMB: I think for purposes of this project, that level of technical detail isn't a...

DEEP: Quite necessary?

PMB: Yeah, because I don't understand. I do not understand what you're saying. I know a little bit, but...



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DEEP: Okay, but anyway from there it went up to the Westfalia separators and from Westfalia separators it went over to upgrading.

PMB: So, in other words, you were at the final stage of extracting the bitumen from the sand and all the other gunk that's involved with it? And, then you would basically lighten it enough that it could go over to the upgrader for refining?

DEEP: Yeah, well. One of the sayings was that the platform was made to run on soup, not porridge.

PMB: Run on soup, not porridge?

DEEP: Yes, because the Westfalia separators had 12 nozzles in them, all around the outside of the bow of itself and the outlet on those nozzles was 1.5 mm. So it had to be fairly thing before you could separate.

PMB: Before it could even go through, yeah.

DEEP: Well what we separated there was mostly the fines, like the clays.

PMB: The very small waste.

DEEP: Yes.

PMB: And then so you really took it to a fine level purification and that point it went off to...

DEEP: Yes. And once it got over to the upgrader, they in turn, took it on as a feedstock for themselves and what they did was they took the naptha out, they put it in holding tanks and then we in turn reused it, naptha.

PMB: Well, a couple of things I want... because you're the first person. Well you guys are the first ones that I've spoken to who actually worked in an oil sands plant. And you were there right at the beginning.

DEEP: 1967, yeah.

PMB: And so I want to ask you, were you at the official opening which was in September, '67.



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DEEP: No, unfortunately. No, I didn't get there. No, sorry.

PMB: And what's your excuse, because Gerry has an excuse too. DEEP: I really don't have an excuse, I just wasn't there, you know.

PMB: Okay. Did you ever have a chance to meet or talk to J. Howard Pew, I guess that's what I'm thinking.

DEEP: No, I didn't.

PMB: Now, I'd like to ask you now about two other guys. One of them, I've spoken to a lot of times is Bob McClements. And he's coming to Calgary and I'm going to interview him next week. And the other one is Joe Camp, who I guess was the second supervisor.

DEEP: Yeah.

PMB: What can you tell me about those two guys?

DEEP: Well I guess, Bob McClements was the head of the oil sands in Fort McMurray, I guess.

PMB: He was a vice-president.

DEEP: Vice-president, yes. I really didn't have too much to do with him. But yeah, he seemed to be a people person. He was very good with people. And I don't know, he seemed to be okay because... I really don't know too much about the man.

PMB: I was wondering whether you had any impressions, because Germain certainly had some interesting comments on him. Joe Camp, same thing. He was a vice-president also and he replaced Bob when he went onto to better things.

DEEP: I'm not sure that it was Joe Camp, but I know there was a person named Joe and I thought he was... it could be him but no, no maybe. We had a start-up engineer and his name was Joe, so I might be getting it confused with each other.

PMB: Okay, he was the top guy.

DEEP: Yes.



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PMB: He came in from Suncor in the U.S.

DEEP: Sunoil, yeah.

PMB: Sunoil in the U.S. and he came here and took the shop over. Not ringing any bells?

DEEP: No, I didn't really have too much to do with the upper management.

PMB: Okay then, in the time that you were here in the early days. Two questions: how have things changed in the early days and what were the biggest challenges?

DEEP: How did things change? But no, I guess it was just progress and the city just grew and grew and grew.

PMB: I'm thinking in terms of the oil sands, in your unit.

DEEP: Oh, okay.

PMB: In your unit, how did it change just over the first few years? What kind of mistakes had the organization made in developing it, you know those are the kinds of questions I'd like to ask you.

DEEP: Well when we first started up I think we were having a lot of problems with the heavier oil sands; we weren't getting a proper mixture with the naptha and stuff like that. And we were getting a lot of overloading. A lot of the bird centrifuges and this was causing the centrifuges to break their sheer pins. So they had sheer pins on them. And when they broke the sheer pins, I don't know what you call it actually, but it would kick the power off. So the machine would come down on its own because it had no power. And that was a safety feature so they wouldn't overload the machine and plug it up, right.

PMB: Right.

DEEP: So what we had to do then was change that sheer pin, there is a sheer pin block and we had to take it apart and change it.

PMB: And so the system was down?



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DEEP: That particular centrifuge was down, yes. And then once you got back online you had to run it a few minutes before introduce feed to it again so that we wouldn't re-trip it. And we were having a lot of problems with that to start with. But once we got that straightened out, everything seemed to work okay.

PMB: Was that a matter of redesigning the centrifuges or?

DEEP: No, they didn't have to do any redesigning. No, I think we just had to mix a different blend of tar sand, a mixture, so that we didn't get all the heavy stuff in all at once.

PMB: So the issue was not the sheer pin, the issue was not that but the material that was actually going into the centrifuge.

DEEP: Yes, I think it was overloading the machines. See we didn't really know how much feed that we could put into each machine without overloading it. So what we did, I guess, is we cut back on the amount of feed that we introduce to that machine. And this was done by a control valve, right. So we just didn't so much feed through them, but then also cut back on your production because we weren't getting as much feed through there. Once we discovered that we could bring the feedback up by blending it a little bit more and getting rid of some of the heavier materials and we were able to introduce more feed to that particular machine.

PMB: And roughly what year was that problem resolved?

DEEP: Well that was probably in the early 60s.PMB: Late 60s?

DEEP: Yeah, or middle 60s, early 60s.

PMB: Well the plant started in '67.

DEEP: That's right. So right off the bat...

PMB: So right at the beginning that was the problem?

DEEP: Yes. And it was designed to produce 45,000 barrels per day and we were having a lot of problems with power failures.

PMB: Why was that?



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DEEP: I'm not really sure because...

PMB: It wasn't connected to the provincial grid was it?

DEEP: No, not at the time I don't think it was. They had their own power plant, but I think there were a lot of power failures and it caused us quite a concern.

PMB: Endless grief, yeah?

DEEP: Yeah.

PMB: Then moving on a little bit, you were there until '98. What other kinds of big changes did you see?

DEEP: Well...PMB: Where do I start, he says.

DEEP: Yeah, well our production increased quite a lot, very much. And they we also had... we switched over from the old Foxborough control board panels to... they're called...

PMB: The name doesn't matter; a new system, control.

DEEP: Yes, a new control board. Honeywell control board.

PMB: Oh, yeah.

DEEP: And we had just four screens, you know. And you had everything right there with your keyboard and you controlled the whole plant, whereas before the control room was probably half the size of that wall over there.

PMB: So it would have been...

DEEP: That was the old control board.

PMB: ...maybe 10 feet, in the old room it was maybe 10 feet high by 30 feet long.

DEEP: Yeah, probably.

PMB: Wow. So then you just have a couple of little computer monitors eventually.



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DEEP: Yeah, well we had four of them, yes. And we could control the whole plant with those four monitors.

PMB: Amazing. Well that's amazing. Anything else you...?

DEEP: Yeah, and I think that those... Well we went to a Honeywell in Calgary and had some training on those.

PMB: Okay and what else?

DEEP: Well when I retired that was about it, I guess.

PMB: What were the biggest challenges that you faced in the early days, but in your career and of course, later on?

DEEP: Well when we first bought our home, that was quite a challenge right there, because we didn't... we weren't making a whole lot of money at the time. And our mortgages were quite high for the amount of money that we were making. But when I bought the house, finally bought the house, I only paid \$14,500.00 for it.

PMB: \$14,500.00.

DEEP: Yes.

PMB: You're probably feeling pretty rich today. I'll bet you've even got it paid off?

DEEP: Oh yeah. That's years ago, years ago. Yeah.

PMB: Because the cab driver was pointing at places on the way here and saying, "You see those condos, those condos townhouses." They cost \$480,000.00 and that kind of thing.

DEEP: That's right.

PMB: Now, I know that you do have an appointment. I'm sorry there was a mess-up.

DEEP: That's okay.

PMB: I want to ask you a couple of things. There was a strike. There were a number of strikes and they started in the late 60s. There was a least one in the 70s. I heard that the one in the 70s sometimes there was one that, I think it was a few weeks long? And



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then there was that really awful one in the mid-80s. Can you give me your impressions about all of that?

DEEP: 1986.

PMB: And it was six months long, wasn't it?

DEEP: Yes, 1986 was six months long. Well when we were locked out, actually.

PMB: Yeah, it started as a strike and then it was a lockout.

DEEP: No, it didn't start as a strike as far as I'm concerned because what we had... if... we had to have the strike notice in place within 24 hours before we were locked out. Which we did, we had the strike notice in place and then they locked us out. They kept all the supervision in camp and we were out. And we were on the picket line and we were only allowed so many people on the picket line at one time. And if you didn't obey what you were told to do on the picket line, you'd be arrested, which happened. Put in the clinker for a couple or three hours or whatever it was. And everybody was charged with a criminal offence, but later those charges were dropped.

PMB: What were the issues around that strike, the strike lockout?

DEEP: Oh, I can't remember all the issues exactly but I think it was a lot to do with wages and stuff like that, and benefits.

PMB: Hours?

DEEP: Yeah, hours of work, yeah. Stuff like that.

PMB: Were you a member of the union obviously?

DEEP: Yes, I was.

PMB: Do you feel... we all around the province were reading about it in those days. Do you feel that it was... are you glad you went through it? Do you feel as though you won at the end of it?

DEEP: I don't know if I'm glad that I went through it or not, but it's just something that's happened and there isn't much you can do about it. But at the time, we did have



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the arguing and set up a... We had a food store and we were able to buy food at a cheaper rate than what you could get at any place else, which helped us a lot.

PMB: What was the name of the union at the time of the strike? And I seem to recall it was something like MIO...

DEEP: No, MIOW.

PMB: MIOW.

DEEP: McMurray Independent Oil Workers. Okay, but the first one was GCOSEBA, Great Canadian Oil Sands Employees Bargaining Association.

PMB: Was that a true union?

DEEP: That was the first one. No. See there were all... these were just local but they were certified I think. Both GCOS and MIOW, and then later on...

PMB: I'm sorry, did all employees, or all non-management employees belong to them?

DEEP: Yeah.

PMB: Was it required?

DEEP: It was if you wanted to work there, I guess. But then, that's what I was going to say, just the supervision were not into the union.

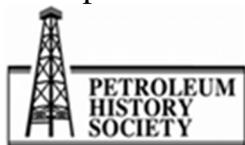
PMB: Say a little bit more about that, why did they want to break you?

DEEP: I'm not exactly sure why they wanted to break us? Well, I guess to do with a lot of the wages and benefits and stuff like that, they didn't want to pay all of it I guess?

PMB: Of course, in those days, the operation wasn't making any money was it?

DEEP: That's right, yes, that's right. In fact, I think it came to almost shutting down because they were losing money like crazy.

PMB: After J. Howard Pew died, which I think was in 1971, there really wasn't a champion for the project was there?



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DEEP: That's right.

PMB: Okay, that's... The biggest challenges, what were the biggest challenges that you faced? Quite apart from the strike, I mean that must've been awful.

DEEP: Oh yeah, six months.

PMB: I gather people lost their house, people and companies went bankrupt and all that kind of thing happened.

DEEP: Well, just wondering when you're going to get back and what's going to take place, you know. Like, I'm not much good at this.

PMB: I want to ask you and I know you're in a hurry and I don't want you to be late to get your tooth pulled or whatever he's going to do.

DEEP: It's just a cleaning anyways.

PMB: The significance, in your view, what is the significance of the oil sands? Are you proud that you helped to develop the oil sands?

DEEP: Of course. I think if it wasn't for the oil sands in Fort McMurray area, Fort McMurray wouldn't be what it is today. And it helped a lot of people, you know, to make a living. And a lot of people come from outside of Fort McMurray to help develop the oil sands, right. It's just that helped the economy of the whole country, as far as I'm concerned.

PMB: It provides the world and all of North America with oil doesn't it?

DEEP: That's right. And there's lots of it. So it's supposedly enough to last the world for a hundred years. I'm not sure but that's...

PMB: You hear big numbers like that, don't you? A lot of people complain about the environmental issues, carbon, CO2 and so on.

DEEP: CO2 and that, yeah.

PMB: What's your thinking about that?



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DEEP: What's my thinking about that? Well, I don't know what the percentages of it. I think it's pretty low as far as the emissions are concerned in the oil sands department. And if you take the eastern part of the country, what about the use of all the coal and stuff like that. I think there is more emissions from coal than there are from the oil sands. You know, there are also emissions from the U.S. over the border.

PMB: Border... and going up from Canada over the border, you know, it's a global thing. You could also argue that most of the emissions from the oil sands come when I drive my car and you drive your car. That's where 80% of the CO2 emissions. So you and I provide 80% of the emissions.

DEEP: It doesn't all come from the oil sands. There are other refineries besides the oil sands.

PMB: There are other sources of oil?

DEEP: That's right.

PMB: And then there is the coal electrical...

DEEP: That's right.

PMB: ... yeah, generation. Finally, last question for you and then I'll let you go and get your teeth looked after. Fort McMurray is a town. You lived here all your life. What do you think about the place?

DEEP: Well, right now, I'd like to see it get bigger because that's I wanted to when I was growing up, to see the place thrive and become prosperous. But, there is one drawback as far as I'm concerned. The infrastructure is something to be desired, plus the traffic is very horrendous. They didn't put in proper roads. Like when they built the city, they should've had a ring road or some way to bypass the city totally so they wouldn't have to bring all their heavy loads and stuff through the city. And it's causing a... well sometimes it causes a major traffic problem when you're going to the plant sites.

PMB: When you came here as a one year old, the population of Fort McMurray in 1941 was a few hundred people, wasn't it?

DEEP: I think it was around 800 people, yeah.



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PMB: Was it that big then?

DEEP: Yeah. Well, maybe a little less. When I was growing up...

PMB: And so now you've got a city that maybe... well certainly 65,000.

DEEP: Oh, I think it's more than that. Yeah, I'm not sure about that but I think it's more than 65,000.

PMB: Well what Gerry was saying is that the official head count maybe 65,000 but everybody's got some people living in the basement and in the spare room.

DEEP: Those people are not counted, are they?

PMB: And they're not counted, yeah. That was a very interesting...

DEEP: But then in the outlying areas, like plant sites and that, if you add all those people in.

PMB: Oh yeah, okay, but they are not citizens.

DEEP: They're transients mostly, I guess.

PMB: They are people that are just here for the time being, for the job. I'm going to turn this off because I know you have to go. Unless there's something you want to say that would really help this?

DEEP: Not really.

[END OF INTERVIEW]



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