



PETROLEUM HISTORY SOCIETY
OIL SANDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

ART MORRIS HELD A NUMBER OF CASUAL JOBS BEFORE BEGINNING WORK IN 1971 FOR PREMIER STEEL IN EDMONTON. IN 1974, HE WENT TO WORK FOR BALDWIN AND KNOWLES, AN OIL DRILLING COMPANY AND WORKED IN WHITECOURT AND FOX CREEK. IT WAS SHORTLY THEREAFTER THAT HE WENT TO WORK FOR SUNCOR AS A BELT WALKER. HE OPERATED A RANGE OF HEAVY EQUIPMENT INCLUDING TRUCKS, GRADERS, BACKHOES, ETC. UNTIL HIS RETIREMENT IN 2002.

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH: October 2nd, 1942 at Grande Prairie, Alberta

Date and Place of Interview: 9 am, May 28th, 2012, the residence of Art and Jane Morris (see below)

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Last name of subject: MORRIS



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AM: It'll be hard to find me talk for an hour and a half.

AD: Well, we'll see. You'll want to tell me all sorts of stories.

AM: No, I'm not much of a talker [laughter].

Outside voice: We're rolling.

AD: My name is Adriana Davies and I'm a researcher/interviewer for the Petroleum History Society Oil Sands Oral History Project. It is the 28th of May and it is approximately 9:15 a.m. and I'm in the residence of Art Morris, a long-time Suncor employee.

Art, can you tell me where you were born and the date of your birth.

AM: I was born in Grande Prairie, Alberta, October 2nd, 1942.

AD: And can you now just give me, you know, a concise summary of your life, and, of course, when you started work in the oil sands. And I'll ask you more specific questions later. So go ahead.

AM: Okay. I went to school in St. Joseph's Catholic School in Grande Prairie. I completed Grade 10, and I did various little jobs around Grande Prairie as I was growing up. The first [I was a] steady employee was for a baker at the IGA store on night shifts for about three years. Then I moved to Edmonton and did everything. And I guess the best job and the longest, I moved to Fort McMurray in 1974 and went to work for GCOS at that time, which is now Suncor, as an equipment operator.

AD: So, you know, tell me how you found out about the work at Fort McMurray and the interview process and so on.

AM: Well, I guess back then everybody knew there was the tar sands, especially if you were from Alberta. And at that time I was in Whitecourt, working on a service rig in the oil patch, and my wife and family gone to Fort McMurray to visit her sister. And the dog and I went for a weekend to visit, and I went to Suncor and applied for a job and was hired and basically stayed in Fort McMurray working. And over about a month later, sold our trailer, packed up all our goodies, and that's where we ended up.

AD: So tell me about your work and how big the work force was at that time. You know, what was it like going up there as a very young man?



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AM: It was definitely different. It was shift work, which I was not used to, so I believe then we were at 28-day cycles. So I worked seven days, one off, seven afternoons, two off, seven night shifts and four off. And when you started work at Suncor you started on the bucket wheel line, walking conveyor belts. And after you did your three months or six months, you had a choice of what field you wanted to go in. Whether you wanted to go equipment operator, the bucket-wheel line, or the overburden—trucking, cat-skinning, graders...

Outside voice: Go ahead.

AD: So continue then. You had to make a choice.

AM: Ya, you had a choice of what progression you wanted to work. If you wanted to be an equipment operator, if you wanted to go on the bucket-wheel line, which was mining those tar sands. And then you started out as a conveyor walker and just progressively worked your way up to a belt-wagon oiler, a belt-wagon operator, and then a bucket-wheel oiler and a bucket-wheel operator.

AD: So what did you choose?

AM: I chose equipment. And I was doing mine support, which was doing all the cleanup around the shovel, or the bucket wheels. We had Cats, graders, trucks, loaders. Cleaned up rocks. Hauled snow. Built roads. Made conveyor beds.

AD: So what would a typical day have been like?

AM: Back then, it was an eight-hour day running equipment. You had three 20-minute coffee breaks in your day. It was good. It was, back then, some of the equipment was pretty cold back in the early days. Most of the Cats never had cabs on them, so when it was 30 below, it was pretty tough to keep warm. But it was good. It was different.

AD: What was the pay like?

AM: I think I started around eight 15 an hour, something like that if I remember. And then you got an extra 18 cents or 10 cents for working afternoon shift. And then there was a night shift premium. But it was good money. I mean, it was a steady job. You knew when you were getting your holidays. You always had a pay cheque every two weeks, so that meant a lot.

AD: So how did that compare, you know, with other construction or oil patch jobs?



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AM: I think it was comparable. I mean, I'm not sure what I was making, I can't remember back in the bakery and that, but it was definitely comparable and probably a little bit more senior up at Fort McMurray. Definitely made more than you would have made in Edmonton doing the same type of work.

AD: Now, did you join the Union? Can you tell me a bit about that?

AM: Back then, it was I guess a company union, they called it. It was called MIOW [McMurray Independent Oil Workers], and it was just our own local. We didn't belong to any U.S. union or affiliated with anybody. We were ourselves. At that time, there were maybe a thousand people or maybe 700. It wasn't very big to start with. Over the years, it definitely boomed and grew, and I think it was then '86 when we had the strike lockout for six months. That's when we joined the big union.

AD: Which union was that?

AM: Gosh, I don't know. 707.

AD: I think it was Energy and Chemical Workers.

AM: That's right, ya.

AD: Ya. So would you say that in terms of your work until the 1986 strike, that there was a cordial relationship with the company?

AM: Oh yes. It was a good company to work for. They were very friendly. They treated us good. They, you know, over the years when the contract was up they definitely gave us our raises and there was lots of benefits. The safety awards were worthwhile to stay for. They always had a big barbecue every year, so that ... No, they treated the employees I would say, "Darn good."

AD: So what, in your opinion, were the causes of the 1986 strike?

AM: I think it was probably union president/management ... you know. We had a pretty headstrong president back at that time, so I think it was ... 'Cause it should never went on for six months. It was just ... It hurt too many people.

AD: Do you want to talk about the impacts of the strike on people?

AM: Well, it was, it was hard because of the cost of living. When you don't get a pay cheque it's pretty tough to live. You still had to make house payments. There was a bit of work in the country,



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but not much. I know some of the boys went to work on the Conklin road between Fort McMurray and Conklin. A few guys moved around the province. Most of us just stayed home and walked the picket line and got our 80 bucks a week, or whatever it was, and shopped at the local Union food store. And the price of groceries at that time was pretty reasonable for us that weren't making any money.

AD: Was there any animosity or even any threats of violence at that time?

AM: No, I don't believe so. Actually, one of my best friends lived right across the alley from me, and he was the supervisor in overburden. And when he did come out on his days off, him and I still chummed. We drank coffee. We'd visit all the time. No, I don't think there was any hard feelings really. It was probably more hard feelings toward the bus drivers crossing the picket line than there was Staff that was working in there.

AD: Because the size of the plant at that time. You know, though there was the divide between the unionized workers and the Staff, you must have all known each other. What was it like?

AM: Well, everybody knew everybody. My wife was locked out. She worked there and she was Staff, so she was there and I was at home, you know. So it was different. But it was pretty hard to fight and say anything, I mean. Because I would think back and probably half the guys that worked there their wife probably worked at the plant too, so you know, there was still a pay cheque coming.

AD: Family against family.

AM: Yes.

AD: So what happened then, after the strike? You went back.

AM: Yup. I think most went back. There was a very small percentage that left and went back to Newfoundland or east or wherever they came from. And then we went back. And the banks were good. Anybody who was, that had fallen behind in their mortgage payments, if I remember correctly, the bank just kind of moved them to the back end of their mortgage or, you know, over the months made up payments, because I don't think anybody lost a house. But I know it was tough for a lot of them, especially if they had four or five kids. And some of the guys' wives would work, and so it was definitely tough on them.

AD: Now, you know, 1986 to the year that you retired. What was it like working at the company?



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AM: It was good. It was growing too fast. It was getting too big, but it was, it was good, and I don't think there was any hard feelings after we all went back.

AD: What about ... I know that there was a number of fires and that there was a serious fire just after the strike. Do you want to talk about fires or any other danger on the job?

AM: Yes, well, we were on days off when the fire started—the big extraction fire—so we missed, I guess, all the action. But they kept us working, but there was a lot of people worried. And I think the company for a while thought they might even shut down because of it. Because there was no production and the conveyor belt, the whole ... We're lucky the whole plant didn't burn. But they put everybody to work, because there was lots of clean up, and if you wanted to take holidays you could take holidays at that time. And I think 75 percent of the people went to work. We worked shift work, cleaning and painting, scrubbing, doing whatever it was to keep us busy. And putting the place back up and running.

AD: So would you say that the union and management set aside the conditions of work to allow this.

AM: Oh yes, yup.

AD: So that there was cordiality?

AM: Yes, once the '86 strike was over, it was kind of forgotten, you know. And I'm not sure it was a couple of years later we had a new president. And things smoothed out. They were good. The company and union worked good together. It was ... I don't think there was any real big ...

AD: So in your opinion, what was ... when did the massive development, you know, that we see today begin to occur, and what was its impact on you?

AM: It got too big, too fast. I guess when they made the change from the bucket wheel line to the shovel-truck operation. And then when we moved across the river, that's when it really started to get big. It got too big, too quick, and there was too many people. There's probably like five times as many employees there now as there was back in the '90s.

AD: And so what work were you doing then, say in the early '90s?

AM: I moved—I'm not sure what year it was, probably in the middle '90s—I moved, and I was still in equipment—but I moved to Dewatering, what we call drainage. And we looked after all the



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surface water that ... rainwater and everything that came down. None of that water can run into the river until it was run through weirs to get cleaned, the oil drained out of it. And it was a big operation, because as the plant grew we had many, many miles of ditches to do, lots of pumps, and we had quite a few weirs to take samples. Every 12 hours you had to take a sample to the lab to make sure that the water was clean enough to go to the river. And drainage at that time, for about four years, when it was a tough operation. When the tar sand froze, it froze harder than cement. So they tried different things to insulate the tar sand, and one was to make snow. So we bought some snow machines, and we made snow for insulation, which was good. It worked good, but it was a tough job to try to pump water for two or three miles at 30 below to make snow. It was different, but it worked.

AD: Nobody's ever told me that.

AM: Ya, I don't think ... Well, I shouldn't say it. Last time I was at the plant was probably six or seven years ago and I know the snow machines were still sitting in the storage yard, but I think they gave them to the ski hill since then. But it was definitely different. It was quite a learning experience.

AD: So for how many years did they make snow?

AM: I think we made snow for three years. And it was tough because to find clean water you couldn't pump water that had sand in it. It was tough to get clean enough water to pump to make snow. We fought, and we did it for three years or so. It was definitely different. It was interesting.

AD: So from the worker's perspective, what was it like, the introduction of the truck and shovel operation. Because I mean you worked with, on the line.

AM: Ya, I was probably one of the quite a few that when they said they were going to do a truck-shovel operation, I said, "It will never work. We'll never produce enough tar sand to keep the plant going, not like the bucket wheels did." Well, it didn't take long for us to change, because then you could do selective mining. When you had the bucket wheels, you went on a bench, and it was three-quarters of a mile long, you had to mine everything on that bench before they could move the conveyors to do another cut. Where with truck-shovel, you could go around the clay, you could go around the rocks to where there was better tar sands. It proved to be a lot better operation and probably a lot cheaper to operate than the bucket wheels.

AD: And would you say that there were fewer breakdowns and damage to equipment?

AM: Oh ya. It was a steadier operation, because we only had three wheels. And if you had a problem with a conveyor then that whole system was down. Where once they went to truck-shovel you could



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load the trucks with loaders or shovels. Ya, there was more feasibility, by far. There was definitely better production. And the feasibility was a lot better with the truck-shovel operation.

AD: How conscious were you of the economics of the industry?

AM: I think everybody was pretty conscious. I mean, there's no doubt that we polluted, probably from the coke pit and the sulphur end of it, but I still believe that Suncor spent more money on pollution and tried to clean it up than anybody else has in the country. I mean, they spent big dollars on different stacks and filtering systems to make it better. And there's no doubt it's a lot better today than it's ever been and they will always keep improving.

AD: Did you have anything to do with the tailings ponds at all?

AM: Very little. We worked with the tailings crew, but we were a different department. We did have pumps and that going across their areas, but no I had nothing to do with the tailings ponds. I worked two, I guess two years, with what they call "the gracious lady." We were pumping heavy water out of pond 1, over into pond 2, taking the sludge and that out, just to make more room and try to get the bitumen out of the pond, which was a different job again. It was very interesting. And then when they had Mount St. Helens erupted, about a year later, "the gracious lady" was parked, so they ended up selling that to I believe a private company in the States. And that's where it went, to clean the potash or ashes off the ponds and lakes at Mount St. Helens.

AD: Did you, I mean, experience innovation in terms of the equipment first hand, because, I mean, you were using ...

AM: Oh ya [laughter].

AD: So what was that like?

AM: It was a great improvement. I remember when I first started on Cats at Suncor, they were 8 D9 Cats, with a putt motor [used to start the Cat before they had starters], no cabs. And then you graduated up to where they had electric start. And then pretty soon we started getting equipment with cabs on, radios, air conditioner. It was all of a sudden you're running a Cadillac instead of a Model T. And it made it pretty nice to, especially if you were on a 12-hour shift, to have a radio to listen to. You had music. You listened to the news. It was ... It made it a lot better to operate. It was more comfortable.



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AD: Now, you're a northern boy. You were born in Grande Prairie, so it wasn't a shock for you to live in Fort McMurray. But can you tell me about the community? What it was like when you first went there to work. And then how it changed over the years.

AM: When I first went in '74, it was a pretty small community. We moved right into Thickwood, into a duplex in Thickwood when I went. Probably two years before probably everybody lived downtown in Waterways in trailers. So once you got up there, we had pretty nice housing. Still a lot of gravel roads: the main road going up was gravel and half the time the buses couldn't make the hill if it was muddy or icy, so you'd have to walk up the hill to walk home. But that was all part of the fun. And it was ... everybody knew everybody. I mean, you knew everybody on your shift. There was four different shifts, so there was some shifts you never seen the guys because they were working nights when you were working days off. But your own shift, you knew everybody. It didn't matter if they were in extraction, upgrading, powerhouse. If they were D shift, everybody knew D shift. And there was lots of skidoo parties, there was lots of ... Everybody, you know, there was big block Christmas parties. It was good. It was a good place to grow up. Lots of young kids. Lots of schooling, so it was ... It was a good place.

AD: Would you say that it was like a company town?

AM: Yes, it was very much a company town, and more so when it was GCOS/Suncor. Once Syncrude started then you started getting people moving beside you, you didn't know. All of a sudden it was twice the size, busy.

AD: Do you think that the residents that had been there for a very long time, I mean fur trade era on, early settlement, was there ever any resentment against the incomers as it were?

AM: No, I don't think so. Because a lot of the young guys, Brooks and that bunch, they were all born and raised up there. Most of them their dads worked at Suncor and then GCOS, Syncrude. And all the boys end up at one of the plants, so I don't think there was any resentment. It probably made them happy. It brought TV to town. You know, they made a road. At least you had a year-round road to get in and out. You never could do that before GCOS went there.

AD: What about relationships with the Aboriginal People of the region.

AM: Back in the early days, there was very few Aboriginals working at the plants. But I think everybody got along pretty good. I mean, they would come to town, like from Fort MacKay, Fort Chip, in the summertime. They would take their boats and come to town, and I think everybody got along good



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AD: Were you conscious on the operational side of the efforts made to hire Aboriginal People?

AM: Oh ya, ya.

AD: Did you work with any Aboriginal People? Can you talk about that?

AM: We had a couple Aboriginal boys, working on our shift. I don't think there was any from right around the Fort MacKay area at that time, from down south, around Lac La Biche, that area. And they were good guys to work with. They all played ball. We all did the same things together on days off, so it was ... and I don't think there was any resentment between, you know, as long as they worked and we worked everybody was happy.

AD: So do you want to tell me a bit about the activities in the community?

AM: There wasn't much activity in the community to start with. Everybody had a skidoo in the winter, so you did a lot of skidooing. There was shift curling. There was only one arena at that time, when we first went up there, so lots of curling. There was shift hockey. Summertime, there was shift ball. There was lots to do if you wanted to do it, if you wanted to get involved. There was lots of fishing, lots of hunting. Very little camping. And there was Gregoire Lake that had a few RV stalls at that time, but there was no power or water or any of that, but you could go camping, go boating, go fishing.

AD: So you had a boat, I hear.

AM: I have one now. I never had one when I was there. Yup.

AD: I'm wondering, did you have any mentors and notable people in the oil sands that helped you work your way up?

AM: No, not really. No. I was more of a loner boy, so I just, as the procedure went on, like the longer you were there, you kind of moved up the ladder from the junior guy on the shift to the senior. But no, as far as having mentors, no, I never had any of them.

AD: You mentioned in our pre-interview that the hiring practices changed later on. Do you want to talk about that?

AM: Yes, once they got bigger, then they went to if you didn't have Grade 12 you couldn't get a job. Back when I started, if you were willing to work it didn't matter what education you had. And,



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over the years, it made it tougher for people to get jobs, because you had to have a Grade 12 and there was a lot of people in the country, the province of Alberta never had an education, and the mills were dying off and there was little work so it made it tough to come to Fort McMurray and get a job. And when you have a family with a couple of growing kids, it's pretty hard to go back to school when you're 25 years old.

AD: So there was a greater emphasis from the early '90s into a skilled workforce.

AM: Ya, by far, you had to come up and go to Keyano College, do their, I think it was a three or four month, equipment course. And if you passed that course, you were pretty well guaranteed a job at one of the plants. But you had to have the education, which I guess doesn't hurt, you know. It doesn't hurt anybody to have an education. I wished I would have gone further, but that was then.

AD: We've heard about the Newfies in the oil patch. Do you have any observations about that. Where the workers came from?

AM: [Laughter.] They're definitely a different bunch. We had quite a few Newfies in our shift, and lots in Fort McMurray, and 99 percent of them are really good characters. They did know how to party. They showed a lot of us Albertans how to do it, so ... But they were good, and I have lots of good friends that moved back to Newfoundland, and the wife and I keep saying that one of these years we got to take our motorhome and go spend four months there, 'cause it would be a trip you'd never forget.

AD: So do you know why they came out? You know, was there any particular reason?

AM: There was just no work there, like back at that time, in the late '80s, early '90s, there was nothing in Newfoundland or Nova Scotia. It was pretty tough. Once a few of them came out and found out there was work here. 'Cause housing was hard. It was hard to find a place to live in Fort McMurray. So once there was a few here, then the relations had a place to stay 'til they got a job and got on their feet so they could afford to bring their family. That was the biggest problem. Once you got into the '90s the housing got so expensive, it was tough.

AD: Was the standard of living, the cost of living, high? Do you want to talk about that?

AM: Ya, it definitely was higher than Edmonton. But you know, back in the early years you had subsidized company housing, so it made it affordable to get into. But the groceries were definitely higher. Gas was costly, so you planned your trips to Edmonton, and when you came to Edmonton you took a truckload of groceries home with you. You did your clothes shopping. At one time, when



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there was a few stores like Macleod's, you could buy clothes, and San stores. But especially for the ladies, there was no ladies clothing stores up there, and I don't think there is today. I don't know. I haven't been there for six years.

AD: Did you benefit from the subsidized housing?

AM: Oh yes, ya.

AD: Do you want to talk about the kind of house ... What was it?

AM: Just like a house I live in today, but there's no way I could have bought a house up there. It would have taken me 20 years to save enough money for a down payment. And with the subsidized housing, you didn't need a down payment. The payments were cheap. I mean, I think my first house was 68 thousand dollars; I paid for it. It had already been lived in for 10 years. I'm not sure, I can't even remember what my payments were, but they were definitely less than 700 dollars a month, so ...

AD: I gather that both GCOS/Suncor and Syncrude created their own realty companies initially.

AM: Yes, they did. Ya. I'm not sure what Syncrude called theirs but Suncor was called Athabasca Realty and they built all their own company houses. Financed it through the company. And if the rest of it, I guess, would have stayed with the Suncor/Syncrude policy, housing today would be still affordable there, instead of the way it is. ' Cause ...

AD: Private market forces.

AM: Yup, once the private market got in there, the prices just went crazy, and you know it's pretty sad to have to pay 400 thousand dollars for a mobile home to live in. And I think probably 400 thousand dollars today is a cheap house there.

AD: So when you left, you sold your house.

AM: Yup, sold it. And we did good [laughter].

AD: You benefited?

AM: We benefited very well by ...

AD: Why did you decide to retire when you did?



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AM: It was time. I was tired of shift work. You never know if you can afford to retire. But I was ready. I'd had enough of Fort McMurray. It was getting too big. I was just tired of it. Tired of working shift work. It was time to get out. So I retired, and shortly after my wife went to Calgary on special projects then she was retired. So we moved to Edmonton. It was nice. It was time to get out of there.

AD: Do you want to talk about the impact of shift work on your life?

AM: Shift work probably takes 20 years out of your life. Some people enjoyed it. I couldn't sleep. If I got home at nine o'clock in the morning, I'd better be in bed at 10 after nine and I was up at noon, one o'clock, and I used to take a sleeping pill. I probably popped sleeping pills for 20 years while I was there, 'cause I don't sleep during the day. And it definitely does something to you. Not everybody can do it.

AD: And then what about, you know, operating heavy equipment in all weathers. I mean do you think that ...

AM: Oh ya.

AD: physically?

AM: Well, probably the shift work, the operating part of it, in the conditions, it had lots to do with it too. But more so just the sleepiness. Like, lots of times they'd have been better off having people working day shifts, afternoon shifts, and night shifts, instead of changing all the time. 'Cause, I mean, if you were on night shift for 10 years, I mean, that's kind of your life, instead of every seven days changing, days nights, days nights. It's pretty tough.

AD: Did it impact on your ability to do things with your children?

AM: Oh yes.

AD: Do you want to talk a bit about that?

AM: When you were working ... I mean, if you were working, and your kids had a Christmas party, you missed it. I probably worked the first 20 Christmases I was there. I don't think I was home for Christmas. I was either on afternoon shift or night shifts, but to be able to have four days off at Christmas time, that never did happen the first 20 years I was there. So there was lots of times you got close to it. About the time you thought you'd have four days off for Christmas, then you'd end



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up getting a shift change. Then, you'd be back at working Christmas again. But that was partly the progression. You know, after you were there so long, you moved up the seniority list, and then you could go to a senior operator. They would put you to a different shift which would be back working Christmas. Ya, it was tough. It was tough to raise a family. It had to be pretty hard more so on the wife and kids because you were never home. And I know when I worked night shifts, I was getting pretty grumpy. Like about two days before I'd have to go back on night shifts, I had already start to ... I didn't want to. I didn't like working night shifts, and I didn't want nothing to do with it.

AD: So it was a real trade off between the security and the pay and benefits?

AM: It was, yes. And then that's where the work was really. I mean back ... I guess you could have came to Edmonton and worked for half the money. So I guess that was the trade off, to stay and make better money. And once you were there, your kids were established, your friends were there, it's hard to move. So a lot of people just tolerated the night shifts and learned to live with it.

AD: You know, we've seen the boom and in comparison to the rest of the province, the very high rates of pay and also the very affluent lifestyles. Do you get a sense of then and now, I mean in terms of ...?

AM: I don't know. It's probably changed all right. 'Cause it's easier to save money nowadays, because they are making a lot more. There's no doubt housings a little higher now than when I left. But there's also lots of overtime, so I think they've traded off. If I was 25 years old, I think that's where I would be going.

AD: So you still would?

AM: Ya, because the money's there. Especially if you're a young married couple, and if you're smart enough and you don't raise a family for a couple of years and you both work there, then you can save good money, especially with the company savings plan—the way it's set up today, you could, a married couple, spend 10 years there. They could afford to get out and come to the city and have a good life and work for 20 dollars an hour.

AD: You know, in terms of, I use the term "company town" and initially, of course, there was the realty and the subsidized housing and all of that. How did that manifest itself in other ways?

AM: I don't know.



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AD: You talked about savings plans and so on. Do you want to talk a little bit about the benefits?

AM: I don't know much about the benefit end, you know. When it come to if you didn't get in on the savings plan right from day one and put your max in, then you spent everything and you never had any money. 'Cause with the Suncor savings plan, if you didn't take any out and get penalized, it wasn't hard to save a hundred thousand dollars, which a lot of the young guys did. I mean, there's some good money to be made when you can start putting 10 and 15 and 20 percent of your wages into a savings plan, where the company matched it 50 cents to a dollar or a dollar, it's you know, it's a pretty good way to make a dollar.

AD: So in comparison to say other mining operations in the province and other parts of the country, I mean, do you feel that they did treat people better?

AM: Oh, I think so, ya. I don't know of any of these companies in the city that had a savings plan like we did, or Syncrude. So ya, they treated us better to, so they would have employees 'cause it was hard to get people to come to Fort McMurray, so they had to give them more, offer more to get people to come there. And every day it's getting bigger and bigger and it's getting harder, I would think. I don't know where all these companies find people today, 'cause they're so many tar sand plants and they're big. I mean, I would think Suncor's union is probably close to 3,000 in the Union today so that's a lot of people and that's only one plant. So they gotta make it worthwhile.

AD: Did you ever have any experience of the work camps?

AM: Ya, I did back in the winter of '66, '67. I went up there for about eight months, a buddy and I worked for Cardwell Supply and we lived in Camp. And we went up there with the idea that we'd make big money, but we found that we were coming to Edmonton too often so six months later we said that we might as well just move back to Edmonton.

AD: The work camps, of course, continue to exist, don't they?

AM: Oh ya, they do. There's lots of camps up there. I'm not sure, like, if North American Roads or Thompson Brothers Construction have any work camps any more 'cause I think most people live in town that are ... Because camps are expensive. It's a good life because you don't have to pay your room and board. Most camps have ideal food. They have everything nowadays, the rec rooms, TVs, poolrooms. For a single guy, that would be the life, a camp job. And you could save money.

AD: So the motivation you would think is still the same today as it was ...



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AM: I think so.

AD: When you went up.

AM: Yup.

AD: Now, you know, one has heard about the infrastructure needs of Fort McMurray and the whole political structure. Do you want to talk at all about, you know, that aspect of it—the local government and the issues and challenges?

AM: Well, I know it costs lots of money to build a town. It costs lots of money for infrastructure. But Fort McMurray is too spread out. It's got too big. People are travelling now too far to go to work. They definitely need another town further up the river, fort, up towards the lake. Ya know, somewhere up around the Firebag or past there somewhere. They need to get away from this travelling an hour, and hour and a half to go to work.

AD: So a new town as it were?

AM: I think ya. I really think they should have a new town because Fort McMurray's just getting too big, and it's too busy. I mean, every driveway's always got three vehicles parked in it and when it takes you an hour to go down Franklin Avenue, it's just getting too big. They've got to build a rigging road up there to get all those heavy trucks and that bypassing Fort McMurray 'cause basically they come down the hill to get right to the plant, and there's probably a thousand trucks a day running that highway now, so they've got to bypass the town and help the people out a little bit.

AD: You know, one's heard, of course, about Highway 63, the "death highway." Do you want to talk about that?

AM: In fact, it's a pretty good highway today compared to what it was when we went there. But, I mean, it is a two-lane highway. It has shoulders on the road now, where it never used to. But it's just too busy. There's just too much traffic for that road, and it definitely needs to be twinned. It should have been twinned 20 years ago. And I don't know why it's taken so long to get it done when you do 30 clicks a year. I mean, let's spend the money and get some more contractors up there and do it in three of four years instead of 50 years.

AD: Do you think that in terms of going back to the politics of, provincial politics, that Fort McMurray has become a cash cow for the province but ...?

AM: I don't know. I mean, there's no doubt they do get a good dollar out of it. But whether it's a cash cow ... They could be putting more money back into it. I mean, airport, helping the town out



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roadworthy. Highway 63 is a prime example. I mean, we know they get good tax dollars out of the oil sands, so let's get the roads fixed. The average person can't afford to fly out of that town. I mean, it's a five-hour drive on a good day to come from Fort McMurray to Edmonton, but it's probably a six hundred dollar bill to fly from Fort McMurray to Edmonton, or maybe even more nowadays. So if you're not on an expense account, you can't afford to fly, so they gotta do something. They gotta start helping Fort McMurray out to get half the vehicles off that highway.

AD: You know, when you went up there, did you think it was going to become, you know, the economic engine that it has become?

AM: No, not a bit. I figured I'd go up there for four or five years and find something else. And there's no way I ever, just never thought it would get that big, there'd be that many tar sand plants, and that many people. It just ... I don't think anybody did.

AD: You thought that this was just another labouring job ...

AM: Ya, ya.

AD: for the short term and that you'd move on.

AM: I think that probably 90 percent of the people who went up there figured two to five years and then they'd move on somewhere else. Then you end up retiring. Most of them got family there, kids now. It kinda took everybody by surprise. I really think it did.

AD: So, I mean, you know, the resource towns. Boom and bust. Well, that hasn't happened. It's just been ongoing boom.

AM: Ya, that's right. It's just boom, boom. And, I mean, it is growing. It's getting better. I think they built a couple more arenas. It's ... I'm not sure what kind of a transit system they have anymore, but when they first got the transit system going the kids couldn't even go golfing at Mac Island, because there was no bus service there. I think there probably was 'til six at night or something. So how do you travel around from Thickwood downtown to go to a movie if there's no bus scheduled? I don't know how late they run nowadays, but when they first started I think eight, nine o'clock at night was the last bus, so it made it pretty tough.

AD: You've also mentioned that your problems with the water supply and electric supply. Do you want to talk about that?

AM: Oh, every time a cloud went over, the power was off so [laughter]. And in the spring, it's no different than any other town, water gets dirty in spring from the runoff. It was different. When



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you're used to living in the city and then you go to a town like that, you know, when spring runoff really raised havoc with everything.

AD: And how long was that, was it before that was addressed?

AM: Oh, I think they were always working on it. It's just that once they finally got the town big enough or probably getting money from Suncor/Syncrude to help to spend money on their water treatment plant and get things fixed up. 'Cause anything like that, and the infrastructure was costly at Fort McMurray because you couldn't expand downtown. So that's when they started building Abasand Heights and Thickwood Boulevard and Beacon Hill. So that meant miles and miles of sewer line going from the water treatment plant downtown up the hill a couple of miles away. So that was pretty costly to start doing all that. In essence, they built three little towns to make four.

AD: Why do you think there's a delay for opening up land for residential development?

AM: I don't know. Maybe the government wanted to hang on to it to lease it out to the oil companies for tar sand. I'm not sure. 'Cause it seemed it took a long time before they did start to open it up to where there was more residential. It's good now, I think, because they're building lots of houses, so they must have opened up a lot more property.

AD: So what is the population of greater Fort McMurray now?

AM: I have no idea [laughter]. I don't know. I'd hate to guess. I don't know, don't know what it would be.

AD: So, you know, putting on your thinking cap, you know, where do you see development going in that region? You know, what's the future of the oil sands?

AM: I don't think it's ever ... Well, in my day, it'll never end. I mean, I just keep seeing more tar sand plants, and eventually 63 is going to be twinned, and it's just going to get busier and busier.

AD: What impact do you think international concerns about so-called "dirty oil" and using tar sands in a negative way?

AM: I think maybe some of these people that are talking about our dirty oil should come and spend some time in Fort McMurray. Maybe come and live in the province. I mean, we are the richest province going, and if it wasn't for the oil sands and our so-called dirty oil, we would be a welfare province. And if you want to talk about pollution, look at back east over the years with all their



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pollution. I mean they come so close to losing the lakes at one time to pollution and garbage. You go to the States with all their coal mines. I think we're a pretty clean province, and we do spend lots of money trying to keep it clean.

AD: I mean, in terms of your own job, you were aware of those water quality standards.

AM: Oh yes 'cause we worked in some pretty dirty areas. Like, if you worked in the sulphur pit at the plant or if you worked in the coke pit, where we had to haul coke away, which is a byproduct of the oil. And it was black. It was just like coal. And we would come off there ... Well, the first 10 years we moved coke with scrapers, open-cab scrapers and that. All you could see was your eyes and your teeth when you opened your mouth. I mean, you'd go home black. And for many years we never even wore dust masks or anything, 'til we finally, hey, you know, somebody said, "This isn't right. You guys gotta start wearing masks." We got cabs on our machines and HEPA filters [used to keep the coke ash and dust from coming into the cabs], because the first 10, 15 years, I guess, people didn't worry about pollution and getting lung disease. But over the years, now safety is definitely a different thing there. I mean, you don't have to think about walking in the dust storms and the pollution. They've spent a lot, and I think the town is really cleaned up. And ya, there's no doubt if you've never been to Fort McMurray and you drive north of the town, once you get close to the plant you can smell it. It has a smell of its own but the smell of money's good [laughter].

AD: It's the smell of money. I think that most people don't understand the complexity of that separation and what it involves. I mean, do you want to talk a bit about that technology from the ground which is what you experienced? Do you want to talk a bit about that?

AM: I don't know much about it, but it definitely, you know, like the technology to get this stuff out of the ground and to make oil out of it is something the average person doesn't understand, that's for sure. I mean, it's the funniest material you'd ever see in your life. You get a day when it's 25 above and you stand there for five minutes, you'd have a hard time pulling your shoe out of it. Yet, when it's 20 below it's harder than cement. And you just wonder how they could get so much oil out of that stuff. It's just, you know, it's unreal.

AD: And it's also, it's a mining operation and you talked about the byproducts, you know, the coke, the sulphur ... And when you went there, it was still a pilot plant in essence, wasn't it?

AM: Yup, it was. Ya, ya. And so ya, we at that time, it was hard. Like Suncor I don't think had any buyers for sulphur. They didn't have any buyers for coke. I don't think they even ship coke out nowadays. For quite a few years, we shipped coke overseas to Japan, China where they were trying



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different things. I think they tried to pave roads, use it for pavement. Sulphur was the same. They make fertilizer out of sulphur, and many other things. But it's just so costly. They do ship sulphur to Edmonton, but there are so many gas plants in the province, and every gas plant produces sulphur. So it's a lot cheaper to bring a truckload of sulphur from Whitecourt than it is to get it out of Fort McMurray. So they have sulphur piles all over. I think they're getting smaller all the time, and they have better technology where there's probably less sulphur than there ever was. But it's a byproduct, and at that time, I think Suncor probably used half the diesel fuel that we made, we probably used at our own plant site. When Syncrude came into the place, then Suncor run a pipe over there and we used to ship diesel to Syncrude so they didn't have to truck so much out of Edmonton. But I think now everybody makes their own gas and diesel fuel. We still send lots down the pipeline.

AD: You know, was there ever any sense of competition between Suncor and Syncrude? I mean what was... You know.

AM: I don't think so, no.

AD: Did some people from Suncor go to work for Syncrude?

AM: Oh yes, lot's of people. When Syncrude first started up we lost lots of supervisors, lots of good people went across the road. Grass is always greener on the other side. I think to start with Syncrude maybe paid just a little bit more to get people. But it didn't really matter you worked Suncor, Syncrude, Albion, it's ... They all pay the same. One might give you two cents an hour this way or the other way, but at the end of the year it all works out. You all make the same money and ... Just with some you've gotta travel a little further down the road to get to work. But with the bus system, they've got this ... It's pretty nice to get on the diversified bus, sit back, and go to sleep, and get off 40 minutes later and ...

AD: Different from the old school buses.

AM: Yup, yup, that's for sure [laughter]. Them old school buses, you get on them and you had to wear a skidoo suit, because you just about freeze to death going to work in the morning. Ya these new buses are pretty nice.

AD: So how long did it take you to get to the worksite in the early days?

AM: About 30 to 40 ... Well, the early days it took anywhere from a half an hour to an hour and a half, depending on the road, the rain. Ya, some trips were long and some trips were ... But the average trip was probably 30 to 40 minutes to get to the plant.



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AD: Added to the shift as well.

AM: Added to the shift, yup.

AD: Which meant more time away from home.

AM: Yup, you basically ... Like if you started work at eight o'clock in the morning, you probably caught the bus at quarter to seven, seven o'clock. So it's a long day. You spend two hours a day just going and coming, so it's ... And when we went to the 12-hour shifts, when you got home you had a shower and you went to bed, 'cause you were gone for 14 hours, so that's a pretty long day.

AD: And again, the impact on the family.

AM: Yup, you know, your wife is trying to feed your kids at five or six o'clock and then you get home at quarter to nine and you've got to have supper or, you know. It wasn't easy.

AD: Would you say that had an impact on marriages?

AM: I think so. I think it did.

AD: Do you think there were divorces?

AM: Oh, yes. There were divorces probably caused from that. Different reasons, because the husband was gone for six days in a row, type thing. Never home. And then when he did get home on the one day off, all he'd want to do is sleep. You know. Probably a lot of the divorces would have happened no matter where you were, but I think maybe the shift work just maybe brought it on a few years sooner. It's hard to say.

AD: Do you think that some of the wives really found it difficult to live up there as well?

AM: Yes, it was hard for a lot of the ladies to adjust to it. And a lot of them didn't want to be there to start with, so when you move into a town with a negative attitude—I don't want to be here—it's not long before they're going back to where they came from, and a lot of them went by themselves. 'Cause they just didn't want to be there. And if you didn't want to fit in and make friends, boy it was tough. That's where we were pretty lucky. We had some good neighbours and some good friends, and so it made it easier. If you were a loner, you were in trouble.

AD: So, but ... so, you know, sum up your experience in the industry and working up there for me.



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AM: Glad I did. I don't think that's part of my life that I would have changed, as much as I hated the shift work and the travel, because it was a long drive to get out of ... to Edmonton. Like if you were going on holidays, you wasted a day of holidays just to get to Edmonton to start your holiday. But I'm glad I did it, and I wouldn't change it. And I have a 40-year-old son who lives here in the city, works here, and I keep saying, "If you went back to Fort McMurray, you'd make better money." But he says, "No, I don't want to live there." So you know... but it's a good life. It was a good life then, and I think it's still a good life today. And the companies treat you good. I mean, even if they are getting bigger and bigger, I still think they recognize if you're a decent worker they're going to treat you pretty good.

AD: Is there anything else, you know, thinking back. Is there an anecdote, any story that you want to share with me.

AM: Aw there's some, but I don't want to share it. I worked with some pretty good people. One of my best working buddies, I spent 25 years working with a guy by the name of Gord Kelly. He and I partnered just about all the way through our career at Suncor. And we worked different jobs together and we had some good experiences, but I'll just say that Gord and I had some of our best time working together. And when I retired, they made a comment that I'd probably spent more time with Gord Kelly than Gord Kelly spent with his wife in 25 years [laughter]. Which was pretty well true.

AD: And you've got an active retirees group. Do you want to tell me a bit about that?

AM: We do. Yes, we do. My wife is involved with it. There's a good group that runs our retiree group here, and I think right now, I'm not sure 'cause I don't get involved with it, but I'm pretty sure we're close to about 500 retirees here in the Edmonton branch. In the last year, we've probably picked up 60 or 70 Petrocan since Suncor took over Petrocan. They're joining our retirement group, so it's a better mixture.

AD: So what kind of activities do you do?

AM: Oh, we have lots of things. In fact, today is the 28th, and on Saturday the second we're, I think there's 70 of us going to the horse races here in Edmonton. The company subsidizes all our functions so for very little money you get to spend the afternoon; you get to have a big meal and play the ponies, so we're going to ... We usually go there once a year. We have two or three different golf tournaments. We have, in September, we have a Chinese food supper. We go to Danny Hooper's Christmas party. There's usually roughly 70 to 100 tickets for every function, and it's kinda first come, first served, so ... But ya, no we have about every three months there's something going on in the retirement group. So it's a good due.





AD: So how much time do you spend talking about the past?

AM: Probably an hour. I mean, if you were there for five hours, you'd probably kick it around for an hour. We chum with lots of Suncor retirees, so pretty any time there's four or five of you together you've got to reminisce for a couple of hours on the old days. Swimming in the pond and you should have been working. You'd go up to the gravel pit when it's 80 above or something. So that always comes up. And then you'll get somebody who will look at you, and he was the supervisor, and he'll say, "God, I didn't know you guys did that" [laughter]. But you wouldn't do it today.

AD: So the retirees involve not only, you know, the labouring part, the unionized part, but also management.

AM: Oh no. We have management. There's probably as many management in the retirement group as there is union workers, and the Petrocan bunch seem to be a good bunch of people. We're just starting to get to know them. There's been probably three or four couples that's been coming to the last three or four functions, but every function we gain a few more. And they seem to be a pretty good bunch. In fact, one of the Petrocan guys is lining up a golf tournament here for the summer, so we'll see how he fits in when it comes to the golf tournament.

AD: So there is life after work.

AM: Oh, very much so. Yup, there is. And we travel. There's four of us retirees from Suncor that we go camping every summer for four days. We do a Monday to Thursday thing and we take turns picking where we're going and what's going on. And you don't know where you're going until about the week before. And whoever organizes phones and says, "Okay we're going here." The only thing is you've got to be from Edmonton there in one day. So we're going here, actually I think it's June 18th or something, we're going for four days to down around the Brooks area. And we have a good time. We all work together so ... We all worked in different departments but on ... But we have a good trip. We have a few drinks and barbecue and lie to each other [laughter], and it's just a good do.

AD: Well, Art thanks so much for sharing your experiences.

AM: Thank you very much for involving me in this.

AD: My pleasure.

AM: Thank you kindly.



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