

PETROLEUM INDUSTRY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Pope

INTERVIEWER: Susan Birley

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SB: This is Susan Birley and I'm interviewing Mrs. Mary Pope, the wife of Mel Pope. I was wondering if you could tell us how you first got involved with the oil industry and how you came to be working on the rig that your husband was working on in the Flathead Valley?

MP: I first met Mel in August of 1934 in Waldo. I had been down there helping my friend in a hotel.

SB: How did you come to be in Waldo?

MP: Because I had received word that she was looking from someone to help her in the hotel, while here daughter-in-law was in the hospital having a baby. It was through friends of friends of hers that knew my mother and knew that I had been out of work. I had been working for the Crowsnest Pass Coal Company for 6 years and was laid off in 1933, during the Depression. So I took this job in Waldo, which was not very far from Fernie, where I was born and raised. At that particular time Mel and a bunch of the boys were down from the Flathead Valley, from Columbia Oils and were . . . whooping it up in the Waldo Hotel. Actually my first meeting was when I was doing some laundry and he brought a stack of laundry and said, when you're through I'll wash my things and I said, I'll make a deal with you, if you pack the water for me, I'll do that laundry. So I guess we started out with a deal, which has lasted 48 years I might say. I then went back to my own home town of Fernie and we corresponded and Mel came out at Christmas time, 1934, and met my mother and stayed a couple of days and went back into the Flathead and the next time I saw him was in May of 1935 when he bought my engagement ring and we made plans to be married in July, the next time he had time off, which was the 14th of July. He arrived in Fernie the night of the 16th of July and we were married on the 17th. One of the boys from the Flathead was Mel's best man, Ed Runstrom. We stayed in the honeymoon suite of the hotel who were friends of ours, that was their wedding gift to us. The next day we left in Ed Runstrom's car for the Flathead Valley, stopping over in Kalispell, Montana. From there up into the valley was a wild ride. It was a very narrow dirt road and sometimes the road disappeared under the running board of the car, which frightened me to no end. I arrived at the site of the Columbia Oils drilling rigs and met Bob and Susie Bentley. Mel had bought a tent and built a 4' wall and a platform and that was my first home, believe it or not. Wake up in the morning and the squirrels running all over the top of the tent and inside and outside. I was nervous of the wildlife because the bears were roaming around very close to camp. We had to bury all our garbage, which we did. It was an exciting time, it was different, it was romantic, if you want to call it such.

#045 SB: I guess you didn't really know what to expect before you went out there did you?

MP: I had no idea what I was getting into at all, I really didn't. It was a lovely summer and I had only been married a few short weeks when they fired the cook in camp and informed me I was the new cook. I really thought they were joking but they were deadly serious.

SB: So how many men were you cooking for then?

MP: There was approximately 32 men living in camp. I faced a huge, big black cookstove and just didn't know how I was going to manage. I had worked for 6 years in a business office, I knew a few things about cooking but certainly not for that many people. Me got up early in the morning and helped me get breakfast under the way and I was on my own then, for the rest of the day, till the evening meal because I made lunches and they sent someone up from the rig to pick up all the lunches. And left me the afternoon to figure out a supper menu, which was most difficult because we were so far away from the nearest shopping are and try to figure out ways and means of doing bully beef in appetizing ways to serve up. the boys were very good, they all pitched in and helped which I appreciated very much.

SB: Were there many other women up in the camp there?

MP: There were, in the lower camp, I would say about 5 or 6 women and 2 children. Mr. & Mrs. Colin Sinclair were there and they had 2 little girls. They had no recreation of any kind. Of course, you were living more or less in the woods, no electricity, no running water certainly. By the time I was finished in the cookhouse I was ready to go to bed and rest up for the next day and whatever trials and terrors that stove held for me. I left in September to come into Fernie because they were going to close down for the winter months and any time after September you can have a snowfall and you'd have to snowshoe out. So I left early so as I could get out the modern way, by car.

SB: And then did you stay in Fernie for. . .?

MP: We stayed in Fernie from November to the following March at which time Mel received word that there was work to be had in Turner Valley. I stayed in Fernie until July because I was expecting our first son, born on the 4th of May, Lloyd, and went to Black Diamond when he was 6 weeks old.

#086 SB: And how was it, was it a big change moving to Black Diamond, was it a larger town than Fernie at that time?

MP: No, it was a smaller town, it was a boom town, it was starting to boom at that particular time. I'd never been exposed to oil field people and how they worked and how they lived. We lived in the apartment of the Black Diamond Hotel for a period of time and we rented for a period of time Art Crawford's house, then we of course had our own house. They had bridge clubs, of which I played bridge but not a great deal. I'm not an indoor person. Prior to my going to live in Black Diamond Mel played pool every night to pass the time and earn extra money. He kind of forgot, when I went there to live that I was quite alone and he still played pool. After about a week or 10 days or 2 weeks of this I got pretty fed up and one night I had reached the boiling point and I walked across the pool hall and told Ed Benoit I wanted to talk to Mel Pope. Mel was shooting pool with Ian McLaren and he wondered what had happened and when he came to find out I gave him his son Lloyd and

said when I got married I had no children and I'm leaving without children. I don't know where I thought I was going but I kind of think if there had been a bus going through I might have been on it. However I walked all over Black Diamond and went and visited Mr. & Mrs. Sewell, but I did have to come home because I had to feed the baby. So we decided that we had better sit down and do some planning which we did do. So I joined the Badminton Club and the nights I played badminton Mel looked after Lloyd and then he had his turn at the pool hall. But it wasn't very long after that that Mel decided, hey, maybe he'd better look into this badminton deal too. So it turned out that both of us played badminton. We took the baby with us and we played badminton all winter long and had fun, we really enjoyed ourselves.

SB: Was there any women's auxiliary group or anything like that?

MP: No. I became a member of the United Church and I didn't belong to the Women's Institute but I did teach the CGIT girls.

SB: What was that?

MP: Canadian Girls in Training. Not too much in the line of social activities. Once in awhile we had the opportunity to go to Calgary, at that particular time in our lives we didn't have a car. Oftentimes we would be given a ride by someone going into town and that was a big event, going to Calgary.

SB: Was there any stores in Black Diamond for clothing and groceries and things like that.

MP: Not really for clothing. There may have been in Turner Valley, of course, that was what ??? miles away and like I say, we had no transportation. So I was very rarely in Turner Valley. But we had ??? store and Bateman???. The Bateman store had been there for many, many, many years. We would do our major part of our shopping when we would go into Calgary in so far as our clothing was concerned or furniture or things like that.

#136 SB: And was there a doctor or hospital in Black Diamond or nearby?

MP: The hospital was in Turner Valley. We had excellent doctors. The first doctor that was there when I first went to live in Black Diamond was Dr. Taylor. Not very long after that Dr. Taylor left for health reasons and Dr. Harry and David Lander came, two of the best doctors I have ever known. Dr. Harry was a friend and a doctor to many, many people. Unfortunately he died very young. Dr. Dave carried on for quite a period of time. I have to thank Dr. Harry and Dr. Dave for saving my life. I think in Mel's excerpts he mentioned the fact that we were gassed in the valley, in Black Diamond and it was through there untiring efforts I made it.

SB: I guess there were a lot of accidents in the oil field, during the time that you were working there it would have been a worry to you having someone . . . ?

MP: Constantly worried about accidents because of . . . oh, I don't know really the reason why, just unfortunate things that happened and every time the ambulance went by every one of us wondered whose husband, brother or son it was going to be. And strangely enough when Mel was involved in an accident going to work one morning, it so happened my mom was visiting with me. Oliver Beasterfield came into the hotel and said, Mary, Mel's been in an accident and I said oh, was he able to walk upstairs to the doctor's office, it was Dr. Taylor at that time, and he said oh sure. So I continued on bathing the baby and

my mother was quite upset and she said, for goodness sake, aren't you going to see what happened and I said, well, if he was able to walk upstairs he must be quite all right. But then I did go and I just about fainted when I saw his face, all blood and gravel, and Dobe Snyder, however they were both very fortunate people, they survived that.

SB: You mentioned that the weather was always a factor.

MP: I had never in my life seen a dust storm, I just about had fits, seeing this huge black cloud swishing down the main street and sitting watching the dirt sifting in, I couldn't believe what I was looking at. That and the first hail storm I ever remember. We were living in Art Crawford's house at that time and I had a nice little vegetable garden and Mel came in and he said, come on outside and listen to this and I went outside and I could hear this roar and I couldn't see a darn thing. But it wasn't very long before there was hailstones there darn near as big as golf balls and just pounded my cabbages in my garden to shreds. I'd never seen the like of it ever in my life before. It was sort of terrifying but after a little while you sort of got used to them.

#179 SB: And you mentioned the worst winter that you can remember, being in Black Diamond as well.

MP: No, our winters weren't bad in Black Diamond. In 1941 when Mel went wildcatting, it would be the winter of 1942, when we were living in Vauxhall we stayed in the hotel for a period of time and I remember one morning, wondering what it was like outside and I couldn't see because the frost was so thick on the window. I went down and opened the front door and there was a raging blizzard going on and George Beatty happened to be coming in the door and he said, you're surely not sending Lloyd to school on a day like this and I said, good heavens no, I'm not. Later on we were able to rent a house, Marge and Jim Larmer had the front half of it and Mel and I had the back half. It was the coldest winter I can ever remember. We got the water from a cistern and when you went out you had to really throw the pail down the hole to smash the ice and haul up your bucket of water and I was always terrified I'd trip over the rope and fall in the cistern and nobody would know where I was until spring. This one particular day I was very careful and turned and picked up the bucket, tripped on the rope and fell in the bucket. I hadn't very many steps to go into the house and I knocked on the connecting door and Marge Larmer came and she started to laugh, I had icicles dripping all over my face and I had a couple in my eye. It was really funny but it was terrifying at the same time. Later on, that same year, we rented Tag Burke's house and I felt like I was civilized again, a very nice home and was furnished. The coal and wood stove was something to battle with, we had been used to gas and forgotten about how much coal and wood you have to use to keep the place warm. And you'd forget and lift the stove lifter and have a permanent scar on your hand. That June I went back to live in Black Diamond, for the rest of the year, making one visit up to Nordegg when Mel was up there. I came back from Nordegg in September for Lloyd to start school and also have our second son, Ken, who was born on the 3rd of October. I stayed in Black Diamond then, until 1947, at which time we sold our home and Mel had built a cabin. We sold our home to Tommy Thompson. He was the dairyman.

#222 SB: How were the schools, was it a one room school house when your son started?

MP: The school in Black Diamond was a very, very good school and good teachers. Mac McLaren was the principal, there was Bonnie Beckman and May Bailey and Miss Goodman. Others at the moment I can't recall but we did stay, as I say, from 1943 that is, Lloyd and Ken and myself, from 1943 to 1947. By the time 1947 came we could not keep 2 places going because Mel seemed to be away most of the time. So we sold our house as I said, and Mel built a nice 2 room cabin and we travelled the country with him.

SB: Who were some of the other women whose husband's worked in the oil industry that you knew back in Black Diamond?

MP: Well, Catherine Jackson did not travel with Joe for. . . well, I don't believe Catherine ever did, she would visit in the holiday times, the summer months when Marie was out of school. But in Morinville, where we started living in our trailer type home there was Clarice and Harry Webster and Art and Gertie Green and Jumbo Bennett and Eve and Irene and George Fife. In times to come later on, Doreen and Ralph Archibald and the Kennedy's, Ernie Kennedy. There was Al and Peggy Fleet, quite a number, many of whom we still keep in touch. Once a year we write at Christmas time and bring everybody up to date on what our families and now our grandchildren are doing and how many we've got.

SB: So most of your would travel around to the same communities I guess, would you?

MP: Many of us travelled. The Webster's and the Gingras's and the Fife's and ourselves seemed to be always on the same rig.

SB: Did you find it hard moving into a new community when you'd first set up?

MP: It was very difficult and of course, by this time Clarice and Harry had Jackie, and their daughter Betty-Ann was born of course, later. I think there was Bobbie Bennett and Ken and Jackie Webster and Mary ???, Maurice, he was the mechanic on the rig I believe, Maurice and Olga. The highlight there, in Morinville was our kids had a crow and he was a real pet. But he was most disliked because he'd come squawking his fool head off about 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning, waiting to be fed and many of the roughnecks were still sleeping, if they'd just come off the midnight shift and trying to get some sleep. We had good times. We saw a lot of the country, we met a lot of people in the different places we were stationed at or transferred to. Morinville there was a mostly French speaking community but we met many nice people there. Bruderhiem was a German colony and they were very kind to us, put on a big dance and a lovely supper when we were leaving. Maybe they were glad to see us go, I don't know. In Lamont they were Ukranian. . . We were most concerned moving our children from school to school but on speaking to McLaren, the principal in Black Diamond before I ever started out he said, what your children will gain in experience and meeting the different type of people and different communities will more than make up for any time lost in school. I'm very glad to say that all the children have done very well for themselves in spite of the nomadic type of life that we had. Unfortunately we don't get to see them as many times as we would like, or all of them as we would like to see them but we think of them and we reminisce many, many time on little things that they used to do.

#310 SB: Did you ever belong to the Oil Wives Association.

MP: Dene Hunter started the Oil Wives Association in oh, I'm not too positive of the date but I remember going to the first meeting in Edmonton in 1950 and it was in a Quonset hut in what then was known as Bentley. There were not too many of us at that first meeting but we all had fun and Dene's idea was to form this club for the wives of oilmen to be able to get together once a month. From there it progressed to a very large organization. I belonged to Oil Wives until such times as we of course, came to Vancouver in 1970.

SB: What were some of say, the worst places that you had to live in. . .?

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MP: Some of the places that we found for living accommodations were not exactly desirable. However, we put up with what we had. One place Mel had found for me down in the Taber area was an old sheep herders shack. At that time I had a 10 month old baby, Ken was just 10 months old and I walked into this awful looking dive and just about threw up my hands in despair. No way was I going to stay there. However very fortunately for us, the Bishop in the Mormon church had known Mel's father many long years ago and he got busy and found us a very nice little place to stay. It was a garage which the people had lined all the inside, put linoleum on the floor and it was certainly a palace to some of the places which we had stayed. We enjoyed being in Taber very much. We enjoyed the people very much.

SB: Did you find things changed from your point of view, with the oil field, can you remember seeing the different changes taking place.

MP: No, not really, because of the fact that from 1947, we moved around so much that my goodness, there were some times, one time in particular I recall, we went to Bruderhiem and we were only there about 6 weeks and they said, guess what, you're going back to Morinville. No, not really, in so far as the oil field workers were concerned. We did our level best to sort of integrate with the communities that we were in because we found it most difficult because of the fact the seismic crews had been in most of these places before us and they were all young people whooping it up and having a gay time and by the time we arrived there, we weren't looked upon with favour very much.

#048 SB: You had a chance in some places to get involved with the events in the community, like the sports . . .?

MP: Yes. Lloyd played softball and I can't really recall the name of the team which was formed . . .no, not softball, pardon me, hockey it was, with the Shalifow??? boys and Jimmy Aiken and they, I think it was some lodge, I'm not too sure. It organized in Morinville and they played southern Alberta. We drove to Blairmore in the dead of winter for the glory of winning the pennant. I myself, didn't participate in any sporting events of any kind, such as golf or ball. We seemed to be too busy making our way in life and living in these trailer homes. They're very small. Mel built ours, as you see the trailers today, he had sent away from blueprints and built. . . everything had a place to go and

everything stayed in that particular spot. We used to have tea in the afternoons, especially when we were in Vauxhall, we made a point of going to each other's homes and having tea and trying to maintain a little degree of social life. We played a lot of cards, we played canasta by the hour. Gertie Green and Dot Gingras and myself, now who was the 4th player, at this moment I can't recall. But when the men were working 4 to midnight that's when we played cards.

SB: What about music, were any of the group musically inclined that you could sing songs?

MP: No, not really. I think because of the fact, if you can visualize the 20 families living 5' apart, however the limitations were between our cabins, we weren't too terribly involved with each other. Because don't forget we're living together and we're working together and we're moving together and this can get a little boring at times. We tried to be involved with the community and people of the community. In other words we weren't having coffee at each other's home at every morning at 10:00 or anything like that. Because of the nomadic type of way, we really still lived like we had homes in the neighbourhood block. You just carried on in the same manner as you would if you were living in a small town or a city. It was the experience, it used to get so that if we were staying in a place for more than 3 months at a time we were beginning to wonder when we were going to move.

SB: Would you sometimes look forward to the move?

MP: I think so. We were always anxious to see who the people that we were going to be living with were like. It's rather funny because when we were sent to Bruderhiem we were all a little bit kind of nervous, being a totally German community, we were just a little bit apprehensive as to how we would be received. But they were lovely people. They couldn't do enough for you, which we found most places people were very kind.

SB: So did you appreciate finally going into a place where you could settle down again?

MP: By the time 1950 came it seemed like Mel was in a radius of 100 miles or so of Edmonton at that particular time and Lloyd was then in high school and it was becoming most difficult for changing schools. So we decided at that time that perhaps we should buy a house in Edmonton, which we did do. We bought it in March and it wasn't finished until I think about August or thereabouts. Got ourselves nicely settled in the house and they sent Mel north and I never did see him until the following March. That was a bad winter in Edmonton and I just wondered what I was doing there. I think I missed the companionship of the cabins and the girls on the rigs. In a big city, after having been away from one for quite a period of time. However Clarice and Harry Webster had a house not too far from us, which was very nice and Fern and Billy Gould. So that made it very nice for us and as I say, at that time, the Oil Wives organization had come about and it was nice to look forward to. And we were in a new community, so we got involved with the community and building it up and a new school. We were involved with everything to do with a new area so we were quite busy and it was rather nice, after a period of time to feel civilized again and have a next door neighbour and a lady down the street neighbour and had room to move around in. I enjoyed it very much.

#118 SB: Did you ever regret being an oilman's wife?

MP: No, not really. There would be times, there was one time after Ken was born, there was talk of Mel going to Norman Wells and I was most upset at that time. I remember having quite an argument with Floyd Walker and I told him right straight to his face that a good worker was a happy man but a happy man can't be happy if he's away from his wife and family all the time. Consequently Mel didn't go to Norman Wells. He refused to. I felt very guilty about it after but I felt I had to have some support, living alone with 2 children. And I felt that I shouldn't have the total responsibility for raising these children. I think the reason we built the cabin was one time Mel came home on a long change when we were living in Black Diamond and Ken was only about, not quite 3 years old and Mel had corrected him for something at the dinner table that he had done that Mel hadn't thought he should and Ken said to his dad, you're not the boss, you just come here. Which was quite true in his little eyes because he saw the bread man and the milkman and the paper boy and the next door neighbour but he didn't know who this man was that came to visit. So we decided that, and for economic reason, we better change our style of living, which we did do. I don't regret any part of it at all. I think all the women on the rigs deserve a lot of credit for putting up with a lot of hardships which we certainly did do. No running water, no nice warm baths, well you could bath in the tub like we did way back before bathtubs were ever invented, things like that. And I think they did a very good job of keeping men happy and working on rigs under very trying conditions.

SB: So you actually supported this pioneering era in the industry.

MP: Well, I didn't know what I was getting into really. I thought those days were long gone in my parents time, that pioneering was finished and done with but then there's many aspects of it in many different fields. Yes, I think that we had a lot to do, all of us, I'd love to see sometime, a reunion of those of us that were on the drilling rigs in the wildcatting years as they're called, from the very early 40's, right on up to the 50's. I think it would be very nice if we could all get together and have a wonderful time, just talking and catching up on 20 odd years of being away from that type of living. We're pleased to hear of all of the sons and daughters of all of the people that were on the rigs with us. They have all had a very good life. I think it says a lot for the parents and the mothers, who tried very desperately to keep the children up with the school work because of, as I said, moving from town to town and city to city. My goodness, their curriculum changed so many times in a year it was unreal. I believe the first year that Lloyd was in school, I think we had 5 different moves and he ended up the year with having measles. Sp he actually did not get one complete school year in his first year at all. However, as I said, I don't think any of us have suffered because of it. Maybe we're better people because of it. We appreciate everything that we have today. And we have made many, many lifelong friends, and good friends. And it's nice to hear from all of you every Christmas. Thank you.

SB: Thank you.