

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Kate Braid

Date: November 8, 2016

Location: Kate's Home

Interviewers: Bailey Garden, Ken Bauder

Videographer: Bailey Garden

Running Time: 01:40:44

Key Subjects: Al King; BC Institute of Technology [BCIT]; BC Regional Council of Carpenters; BC Federation of Labour [BC Fed]; Carpenter's Union; Communist Party; Continuing Education [SFU]; Construction industry; Creative writing; Feminism; International Women's Day [IWD]; Labour arts and culture; Labour education; Labour history; Labour school; Labour studies [faculty]; Malaspina University-College [now Vancouver Island University, VIU]; May Works [festival]; Oral history; Poetry; Politics; Sexual harassment; Simon Fraser University [SFU]; University of British Columbia [UBC]; Vancouver; Vancouver Island; Vancouver Industrial Writers Union; Women's Committee [BC Fed]; Women in labour; Women's rights; Women in trades; Women's movement;

Kate Braid is a labourer and poet, writing about her experiences as a female working in the male-dominated construction trades.

00:00 – 04:29

In the first section of the interview, introductions are made. Kate Braid was born in Calgary, Alberta on March 9, 1947. She was raised in Calgary until age 10, when her father got a job in Montreal. Her family lived in an Anglophone neighbourhood. She has memories of the FLQ crisis of the 1970s as she was still working in Quebec and dating a Francophone man at the time. She recalls understanding their frustration but feeling it was not her place as an Anglophone, and so she left the province. She recalls Expo 67, which was the first time she remembers feeling “truly Canadian”. Politics were not an issue in her home growing up. Her father was a businessman and an alcoholic, and she recalls getting into regular Sunday night arguments, which evolved from defending her mother into arguments over the working class. “Anything he disliked, I liked”, said Kate, so she would defend the “working guys” from her father who would make fun of them. Later in life, he said “you know, you should thank me – I made you a feminist and a trade unionist”.

04:30 – 08:59

Kate describes her first experience with labour and work. Her second year of apprenticeship at BCIT, Bill Darnell came to one of her classes and encouraged students to sign up. Up until then, Kate knew nothing of unions, except that her father hated them. She was the only woman she knew of in the industry at the time, and signed up for increased job security, as construction work was precarious even for men. Bill asked her

to join the Vancouver local of the Carpenters' Union, where she would be the first woman in the local. She was very nervous, as she had been harassed at her last (non-union) position and fired after an accident on the job. Kate was very fascinated with the work (concrete, big jobs) and wanted to learn more. The business agent assured her that harassment would not be tolerated in the union. When Kate expressed her harassment concerns to the dispatcher, Steve Kress, he told her: "Sister, in this union, if you have any trouble, we're all behind you". This was her introduction to the labour movement.

09:00 – 13:53

Kate describes how she got into carpentry and woodworking. "Girls could be a nurse, a secretary or a teacher", she says of the sexist culture in the 1960. She says the hardest part was even imagining herself doing physical labour, not the job itself. She was at a party on Pender Island, where she had been staying, but was running out of money. There were no "girl jobs" available – childcare or waitressing. A friend at the party recommended she apply for the job he just quit, as a carpenter building a local school. "I don't know how to build anything", she said, and he said, "No problem – just lie!" to which all the other men nodded and agreed. She was "dazzled... broke and desperate", and her male friends lent her a toolbelt and work boots to take to the interview. The man (Ray Hill) who hired her later confided that men on site had been slowing down, and so he hired Kate because he thought they would "show off" if a woman was at work. He had told his wife, "You'll never believe it – a woman wants to work in construction!" to which his wife said, "So, hire her!". Kate was in love with the work within a week.

13:54 – 18:10

Kate compares her experiences in construction with her other working experiences. She knew she had found her niche. She received a BA in Secretarial Work and worked for a time as a secretary and receptionist, as well as childcare, but she didn't enjoy or excel at the job. She was almost thirty when she started in construction. The money was great, but having a finished product at the end of every day brought her the greatest satisfaction. "It was as if all of my masculine parts and all of my female parts were together. I had never felt so whole."

The clip is interrupted to close a window due to construction noise.

18:11 – 20:56

Kate started her apprenticeship at a non-union company, working and indentured under one single man named Jac Carpay. In the early 1980's it was still very difficult for her to get a job. She went to "Man Power" (temp agency) and even called contractors from the phonebook. Many would give her an excuse as soon as they heard a female voice. Jac was also hesitant to hire her. Kate found out his daughter was having trouble advancing in her job as manager of London Drugs due to being the first female on site, and tried to point

to that as leverage. She finally offered to work for him for a week for free, to which he agreed and insisted to pay her wage regardless. After 2 months he told her to “go get those papers” and signed her up. “He was a very fine man; I was very grateful for him”.

20:57 – 25:40

Kate’s first construction job was in 1977. “There was no diversity of any kind – I don’t think I ever worked with anyone other than a white male until the 80’s, anyway”. In her entire construction career (over 15 years), she recalls working with one Indigenous male, one Sikh male who was a crane operator, and one Asian man. When she worked for the union, she worked many big jobs like Pacific Centre, the SkyTrain, Brentwood Mall, and various high rises, and worked closely with other building trades on these projects. There were no women or men of colour in those other trades. This would have been the same for union staff, though Kate notes that working on site, they never encountered union management or staff beyond the site supervisor, foreman or health and safety representatives. Women In Trades did not exist when Kate attended BCIT; it was started around 1980. Kate had left partway through her Master’s degree to work and live on Pender Island. After working as a labourer for 2 years, she returned to Simon Fraser University and wrote her thesis on women in non-traditional work industries in BC. She says she “did it as a therapy project – I wanted to talk to another woman”, as she had only ever met one female in a non-traditional industry, Judy Currelly (first female bush pilot). Kate found it difficult to find women to interview for her thesis, but found some working in the fishing and logging industries. She points to the BC Human Rights Commission’s work in the 1980s which threatened employers if they discriminated based on gender, race, etc. in hiring practices as a reason many of these women had been able to start in these industries. She found that no matter the industry, these women shared similar problems – “the guy culture”, and trying to navigate sexist attitudes in the workplace. Kate’s thesis was titled “Invisible Women” and is available in the SFU Archives.

25:41 – 27:40

While Kate was doing her pre-apprentice training (1980), International Women’s Day was often marked with large parades, protests and marches. Annabelle Paxton, who worked for the radical women’s press Press Gang, phoned Kate and discussed upcoming workshops planned for IWD. Kate proposed the idea of hosting a Women In Trades (or Women in Construction/Non-Traditional Work) workshop. On the day of the workshop she was shocked to find the room filled with women. “It was heart-stopping – it was so thrilling to have other women.” By the end of the workshop, the group had agreed to form an organization, which was the beginning of Women In Trades. Kate says that group is what kept her going through the trades.

27:41 – 28:58

In this section, Kate discusses the Women In Trades education program at BCIT (separate from the group mentioned earlier) and the various women who were in charge of that program.

28:59 – 38:26

In this section, Kate describes the differences she found between unionized and non-unionized construction work. In general, she says, “Steve Kress was right – the union backed me up”. There wasn’t much harassment, although many of the union men were not used to working with a woman. One partner she had on a job, though very nice to Kate, would always say, “You know, if you were my wife...” and would always worry she would hurt herself, warning her to be careful. One day, he physically blocked her from working. Kate had an accident on site that day because she was so distracted and nervous from his constant comments during the “rush job” they were on. Women in Trades met once a month; but for whatever reason, 3 women from the group called her that night, and each gave her a pep talk to keep going despite the sexism at work, and encouraged her to go to the union. This gave her the courage to confront her partner the next day, and they worked it out. She also talked to Tom Murphy at the union, and he advised her on how to proceed. The head of the BC Regional Council [of Carpenters] was Bill Zander, and his assistant was Colin Snell. Kate was the first woman hired to Vancouver Local 1. Marcia Braundy was the only other female in the union, in the Kootenays, aside from female clerical workers who were also members. Bill Zander got a harassment clause put into the contract, which “blew all of us at Women In Trades away – we hadn’t even asked for it”. The term “sexual harassment” was still very new. This harassment clause said “worker” as opposed to “women” – something like, “Every worker has the right to work under conditions free from harassment”. It made Kate feel protected, though she never needed to use it. She later learned from a business agent that the clause had been invoked by several male workers over the years, who were being harassed by other men on camp jobs. “It gave courage to the men, let alone the women”. John Takach was in charge of the local at the time, and organized a conference for all the women in the Provincial Council of Carpenters (the 2 carpenters, and clerical workers). It was very supportive, and Kate was active in the union on both the Apprenticeship and Unemployment Committees. She feels it is no coincidence that some of her best allies against discrimination were men of colour.

38:27 – 41:27

Kate was invited to speak at the Carpenters Convention in the early to mid-80’s about her experiences as a woman in the industry. Her Local was nicknamed “Red Square”, because there were many current and ex-Communist Party members. She describes these folks as “principled human beings” who were open-minded and felt she had as much right as any man to work in the industry. Kate sat on the Women’s Committee at the BC Federation of Labour on behalf of the Carpenters. After leaving the trades, Kate worked at Simon Fraser

University, on the Labour Studies department (then part of Continuing Studies Program) as the liaison between trades and the university. She helped to set up a series of one week conferences for union women, trading them on leadership skills. There was almost a management program for union leadership, but it didn't carry through.

41:28 – 47:47

When Kate started her first construction job on Pender Island, she started taking notes in a journal, trying to make sense of “the guy culture” she was experiencing at work, as she had nobody to talk to. She would write 3-4 pages every day after work. Eventually, she says she became “bilingual – I can do guy talk”, learning to adapt to the culture of one-liners, vulgar comments and competition. After a while, her notes became briefer, as she was often tired after an 8-10 hour day of work, and she noticed the entries and lines became shorter and started to resemble poetry. When she finally got the nerve to show someone her work, they recognized it to be art. In 1986, she was working up north in Dease Lake, building a house for Ray Hill's son John. John recommended a job in the bush nearby, working on a crew of Indigenous males. There was a “deep acceptance” she received from that crew, and it was the first time she felt confident in her title as a carpenter, as they respected her as the most skilled one at camp. She returned to writing after this, and attended the Kootenay School of Writing. This is where she found her mentor, Tom Wayman, and compiled her first collection of poetry, *Covering Rough Ground*. She never predicted being a writer, much like she never expected to work trades.

47:48 – 52:24

Kate provides her opinion on art, music and literature in the labour movement. She wishes it served a bigger role. “It's fun, for one thing”. She was on the Executive of the Carpenters for a time, and one thing that she and Chrissy Gibson organized was a Cabaret, with music and skits. When working with Tom Wayman, she was invited to join the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union, a group of writers who all wrote about work and labour. Julius Fisher decided to host a weekend called “May Works”, a celebration of labour. The poets of her group joined with a local feminist music group, doing performances on a wide range of themes. She recalls the end of the show, when everyone in the audience stood up and joined arms to sing the final song. “It made people feel good to have their work honoured- to celebrate, even. We're the ones who make the world work, not the guys making million dollar deals for their buddies. We're the ones who clean it, and cook it...”.

52:25 – 56:18

In this section, Kate describes working on the Executive of the BC Regional Council of Carpenters. There was an upcoming election in the union, and Kate was nominated as a trustee, to her surprise. At the time, the union was fairly divided between right and left-wing politics, and Kate was in the left caucus. There was a meeting called of the left

caucus where an all-male slate was announced. However, the International stepped in and annulled the election after the left caucus won, and the process had to be repeated. At the second meeting of the left caucus, names were announced, and Kate recalls, “I’ll be damned if guys – a couple of guys – didn’t stand up and say, ‘We want Kate on the slate.’” It was difficult for her to be elected, not as a woman but as a “lefty”, though they did try to use her gender against her.

56:19 – 59:40

Kate discusses the decline of union membership over time, which she feels is not a good thing. The union provided her with a voice and confidence, much like labour poetry did. It used to hurt her to hear guys on site talk about how dumb they were, as they were conditioned to undervalue their labour and work. The union helped these workers feel valued, as though their thoughts and opinions would be honoured and respected. Any time she has seen people give up a union, she notices a lack of self-respect. She thinks management has been “clever” in convincing people to give up on unions.

59:41 – 01:06:18

In this section, Kate discusses how she met Al King, and ultimately wrote the book *Red Bait! Struggles of a Mine Mill Local* alongside him. She was working at SFU as the Director of the Labour program, and had worked with Neil Boyd on a history of the Health & Safety Committee of the BC Fed. Al either was or had been the head of that committee. Al phoned Kate personally and asked her to write his memoir. She had only written poetry until then. Al King was a trade unionist and storyteller – “a bit gruff – but one of those just, salt of the earth, a really great human being. Honest and compassionate and tough...” Kate initially agreed to do a short leaflet for him – five years later, she found herself pulled into his story, and wrote the book on his behalf. The foreword was written by Vince Ready, labour arbitrator. Al was working during the “Red Scare” days in labour and was a Communist Party supporter, sitting on the executive of Mine Mill during the raids from Steelworkers. Al met Vince while organizing at various mills around BC. There was a group of guys close to Al called “King’s Wrecking Crew”, and Vince was one of them. Eventually Mine Mill voted to merge with the Steelworkers; as Kate describes it, it was a tough choice and they could not hold out any longer against the larger resources of Steel. Mine Mill was one of the first unions to invite worker’s wives into union meetings. Al later worked for Steel until he retired, and continued doing Health & Safety Claims until he died of asbestosis, developed from work.

01:06:19 – 01:15:10

Kate fills in the rest of her personal timeline. She worked in the construction industry for 15 years, before teaching construction apprentices at BCIT. She got into management at SFU, and then took courses in Creative Writing. She was tired of being the odd one out in the construction industry. Even as an instructor, she still faced sexist attitudes about her

abilities, and decided to pursue another avenue. She found management to be “soul-deadening”, and quit her job at SFU to pursue an MFA in creative writing. She taught at SFU, UBC, Capilano College and Malaspina University-College (now Vancouver Island University) during the 2000’s. She largely taught poetry and creative writing, but was motivated to include labour when teaching creative non-fiction. She set up an oral history class, teaching students to interview local Nanaimo fishermen. Once the students heard these stories, they were excited and motivated to write them down, and Kate invited a local publisher to the final class where they were read. This work was ultimately published in a collection called *The Fish Come in Dancing: Stories from the West-Coast Fishery*. Kate had another class interview workers from the local mill that was closing. The interviews are now in the Nanaimo Archives. Working on Al’s memoir made her realize how valuable the stories of workers are.

01:15:11 – 01:18:40

Kate published several non-labour poetry books on people such as Georgia O’Keefe and Glenn Gould. She had many unpublished poems from her time in the trades, and released her second collection of labour poems in 2009, titled *Turning Left to the Ladies Room*. She wrote a personal prose memoir of her experiences as a woman in construction, *Journeywoman: Swinging a Hammer in a Man’s World*, released in 2012, and revised her first work, reprinted as *Rough Ground Revisited*.

01:18:41 – 01:26:20

Kate reiterates the value of capturing stories of labour and work through oral history and art. She feels it gives pride, confidence, and self-respect to workers, as well as providing great organizing tools. She recalls the first time she heard the term “sexual harassment”, when Astrid Davidson of the BC Fed announced a conference on the topic. She says she “laughed for two days out of relief”, that someone had put a name to the experience, and that they could now share their stories and be recognized. Labour music, history and art provides recognition of these issues. “That’s was the women’s movement – we were talking to each other, and the guys were right, it’s dangerous! Because when people talk to each other, they get ideas!” She discusses the impact that WWII had on many attitudes. She expresses her thoughts on the women’s movement and women in trades today: “Women are not the problem... we’ve trained women, we’ve prepared them... 3% - that number hasn’t changed in 40 years... this is a management problem”. She points to current political events such as Trump’s run for President and Brexit as signs that sexism, racism and xenophobia are still present today. This interview was taken on the day of the 2016 US Presidential Election, so the topic is discussed. She relates the term harassment to the modern term of “bullying” that has raised awareness in schools.

01:26:21 – 01:32:07

Kate discusses the hurdles that women face in male-dominated trades today. She is sad to say that they have not changed since she was in the construction industry. She has noticed more women coming to the trades by their own volition (as opposed to being prompted to by a man). She has never met a woman who was not capable of the work itself – the challenge is navigating a male-centric work culture, and being a minority. She points to research on the topic such as stereotype bias. She still gives talks to women in trades today. She talks about how the group Women in Trades used to run workshops on “one-liners”, as this competitive style of “joking” or “ribbing” is so common in masculine culture that women are often taken aback by it. Kate used to carry a list of “come-backs” in her pocket.

01:32:08 – 01:35:37

Out of all her awards and accolades, Kate is most proud of the work she has done on behalf of women during her career. “I think it is one of the most profound issues in the world; sexism is everywhere, discrimination against women is everywhere.” She says the work she has done for her sisters is also work done for her brothers. Her favourite part of the construction industry was the physicality – “it was sort of pitting my body against the world, and seeing the product of it.” She loved working with wood as a material. She also appreciated the pay and respect she got as a carpenter. The interview is wrapped up.