

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Muriel Overgaard

Date: Jan. 18, 2017

Location: Muriel's home, Victoria, BC

Interviewers: Ken Novakowski, Bailey Garden

Videographer: Bailey Garden

Running Time: 0:46:43

Key Subjects: Accounting; BC Federation of Labour [BC Fed]; BC Teachers' Federation; Bernice Kirk [former Secretary-Treasurer, CUPE BC]; Canadian Army; Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE]; Cooperative Commonwealth Federation [CCF]; Day of Protest [1976]; Eaton's Department Store; Elbow, Saskatchewan; Farming (industry); Grace McCarthy [former Social Credit MLA]; Grace Hartman [former President of CUPE]; Greater Victoria School District No. 61; Imperial Oil; Joy Leach [former mayor, Nanaimo, BC]; Municipal pension plan; Negotiations; New Democratic Party [NDP]; Pay equity; Rosemary Brown [former NDP MLA]; Ross Thatcher [former Liberal Premier, Saskatchewan]; Sarnia, Ontario; Status of Women (Canada); Strikes; Strike pay; Trade union movement; Victoria, British Columbia; Western Grain Elevators; Women's Committees/Organizations; Women's rights movement;

Muriel Overgaard was born in Elbow, Saskatchewan in 1920. She went on to become the first female President of CUPE BC, serving from 1976-1980, and ran as an MLA for the NDP. She played a significant role in establishing CUPE's Women's Committee, the first for any BC union, and in the establishment of the municipal pension plan. Her grandson, Rich Overgaard, currently works in communications for the BCTF and previously for CUPE BC, and was present during the interview at Muriel's home.

00:00 – 04:20

In the first part of the interview, Muriel introduces herself and her personal history. She was born in 1920 in Elbow, Saskatchewan, one of seven children, and her father worked for the Grain Elevators. He eventually became Superintendent of Western Grain Elevators and moved into the main office eventually. Muriel fondly recalls playing by the river with her older and younger siblings (she was in the middle), and stood 5 feet 10 inches by 12 years old with red hair, freckles and glasses, so she was "the odd one out". Sports like softball were her "saving grace" growing up. There was never any talk of unions, since her father worked for the company. The family moved to Shaunavon, Saskatchewan, where Muriel became involved in basketball and spent her last year of high school. They lived next door to a dentist, and Muriel babysat his children and became a secretary at his office. Her older brother and sister were sent to university for engineering and nursing, but there was no money left for her, so she had to find her own path. She usually became

the leader of any activity she was involved in, whether Girl Guides or sports. Muriel followed her father when he was transferred to Moosejaw, and she enrolled at a business college and joined the Army. She worked at Eaton's Department Store for a time following college.

04:21 – 09:18

Muriel joined the Canadian Army in 1942. She attended Basic Training in Vermillion, Alberta, and Muriel feels she “could have done anything in the Army”, had she not fallen madly in love with a young farmer named Keith in Saskatchewan prior to being sent to Vermillion. Instead, she requested to be sent to Regina so that she could be close to the farm. Keith was unable to enlist in the service due to a small medical problem. The couple was soon married, and only way for Muriel to be granted leave from the Army was to become pregnant, which she did. She gave birth to their son Bob and went back to the farm. Sadly, her husband died in 1947, and she and her son had to start over. Muriel had never lived on a farm before being married, but worked outside alongside her husband, so she was able to manage some tasks after he passed away. It was winter when he passed away, and they were snowed in so badly that the drifts were higher than the farm windows. Muriel called the undertaker to take them into Moosejaw, as Keith was very sick and getting worse, and he agreed to send an ambulance plane – it took two weeks before they could land due to snow, and Keith was taken out on a toboggan stretcher with the attendants on skis. Ross Thatcher, a good friend of Keith's, owned a hardware store in Moosejaw and offered Muriel a job while she sorted out her next steps after Keith passed. Ross was a member of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and was elected locally, and later became a Liberal Premier of Saskatchewan.

09:19 – 12:05

After working at the hardware store, Muriel and her son Bob moved east to Sarnia, Ontario, where she worked for Imperial Oil. Her mother-in-law wanted her to live closer to her in Victoria, as she had lost her son and husband and wanted to watch Bob grow up, so Muriel agreed to move to B.C. for one year, knowing she could return to her job in Ontario if she wanted. She has lived in Victoria ever since. She stopped at the farm on her way out west, to deal with 200 chickens she had purchased before Keith passed. 180 of them had survived the winter on their own, and so she had her neighbour teach her how to butcher them properly. She skinned, sliced, and canned all the chickens, loading up her 1937 Chrysler with her “fortune” and drove off to BC. She jokes that her and Bob couldn't stand chicken for a while after finishing off the cans.

12:06 – 14:08

Muriel's first job in Victoria was in the accounting office at The Hudson's Bay Company. There was a female personnel officer there, which was rare at the time, who was “wonderful” to Muriel. When Muriel explained that she couldn't support her son on any

less than \$22 per week, the officer agreed to that wage for her, if she could operate their accounting machine. Muriel went to the Shaw Business College for a 3-day course on operating the machine and could start work that Monday. She stayed there until Eaton's opened a mail-order location on 8th Street. They had a system where former Army service men and women would be given priority for a job if they wanted to return to work at Eaton's following their service. Muriel was given the Assistant Manager position, and later stepped into the Manager role, with a staff of 12.

14:09 – 16:04

One day, an Eaton's employee told Muriel that they would be receiving a big delivery and to "play it cool". It turned out that Eaton's had bought out Spencer's, which was the major store where the modern Bay building is in downtown Victoria, and was opening a proper store location. Muriel helped set up the accounting system for this store and another location in Duncan. She had a good relationship with Eaton's as an employer and the manager often drove her to work, dropping her son Bob off at school along the way.

16:05 – 17:44

In this section, Muriel discusses her second husband. He served in the Navy. Muriel wanted to have a second child, and so she left her job at Eaton's and gave birth to a daughter, Brenda. They purchased their first home in Victoria for \$7000 on The Gorge. Muriel cared for her children until Brenda was old enough for grade school, and then got a part-time job. She missed working, and decided to apply to 3 jobs, receiving offers from all of them. She chose to work for the school district, as the hours fit better for her childcare options. She became a full-time secretary of public schools in 1971, the same year she became a trustee of the CUPE Board.

17:45 – 23:03

In this section, Muriel describes how she became involved with the Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE]. She had negotiated her own salary when she started work for the school district, and soon found she was making more than most other staff, which really bothered her. CUPE Local 947 was organized by a representative named Tom Smith. Muriel was playing poker with him when he asked her to join, as they needed one more member to become an official local. She attended several meetings and wanted to become more involved, and so she put her name forward for President after a few years as a local Trustee and later Treasurer of CUPE BC. Local 947 consisted of all employees of School District #61. The Union was "a wonderful support system". They tried at that time (early 1970's) to get the BC Teacher's Federation involved with their local, but it was refused. CUPE BC held an almost province-wide strike shortly after Muriel became Treasurer (she served 1973-1975), and the bank gave Muriel a hard time when she tried to deal with funds during the strike, so she moved the union funds to a credit union. Muriel's basement served as an office to organize the strike pay, which was all done

manually. Muriel cannot recall the cause of the strike, but remembers negotiations seemed to be going nowhere and it was difficult on members. She became First Vice-President following this, and started the Women's Organization for CUPE.

23:04 – 26:24

Muriel discusses the creation of CUPE BC's Women's Organization. She knew that change was necessary, as the union was controlled by men – she was one of the only female on the division at the time, alongside a woman from Surrey. The Status of Women report was being discussed provincially and federally at the time, which helped to motivate Muriel to work on women's issues. They hosted workshops in Vancouver for women on topics like parliamentary procedure, public speaking, labour law and others. Muriel stayed on as President of the Women's Committee for several years before stepping back, and many women became actively involved in the organization. Many notable women were part of the Committee - Joy Leach, who later served as mayor of Nanaimo in the 1990s, and Rosemary Brown, the first Black Canadian woman to be elected as an MLA, among others who developed their skills and knowledge with these workshops. Men in the union were hesitant at first, but Muriel never ran into problems in terms of their support for the organization. Pay equity was "always" an issue for women, and "just when you think you've got there, you take two steps back".

26:25 – 28:38

Muriel was elected President of CUPE BC in 1976. She continued to work for the school district in Victoria, as the President was not released to be paid full-time, although she laughs that she certainly worked full-time in the position. They eventually set up an office and had Bernice Kirk as a full-time Secretary Treasurer. This made it more difficult for Muriel, as she was forced to be away from the office for her school district work, which left her disconnected from the activity. Being President of CUPE BC also made her a Vice President at the national executive level, travelling to Ottawa for meetings at least once a month. This presented another challenge, as she was the messenger to BC locals for decisions made at the national level, which were not always received well. She was happy to say goodbye when she left the position in 1980.

28:39 – 30:55

In this section, Muriel recalls meeting with the government many times – some successful, some not. One time, they met with the Cabinet at Esquimalt Council Chambers, and Grace McCarthy was in attendance. She ignored the requests from Muriel and her colleagues, and ended the meeting by physically turning her chair around, literally turning her back on the CUPE BC representatives. Muriel "let herself be known" and expressed her feelings clearly to McCarthy. The next time she ran into McCarthy was years later, at her great-grandson's graduation in Vancouver, and Grace recognized Muriel right away. "We just glared at each other – we never forgot that". Muriel also

recalls the Day of Protest in 1976, over the issue of wage controls. She recalls writing her speech at her desk as she had to open the school district office, and returned to work after delivering her speech at 11 AM.

30:56 – 32:48

Muriel often travelled between Victoria and Vancouver. She describes her husband Rasmus Overgaard as a “gem” as he put up with her weekly commutes back and forth, and he would often accompany her on trips. Her children were young adults by that time, though she acknowledges that she sacrificed a lot of her daughter’s quality time for the job. She comments on a story told previously by her grandson Rich Overgaard in which she was asked by CUPE National Representatives to confiscate the company car keys from CUPE BC executives during a national strike. “The boys weren’t very happy about that”, and she never did get their keys from them.

31:49 – 35:31

Grace Hartman was elected as the first woman to lead a major labour union in North America when she became CUPE national president in 1975. The President of CUPE Ontario was also a woman by the name of Bernice at that time. However, there were no other female presidents of unions in BC that Muriel can recall. She attended all BC Federation of Labour conventions and doesn’t remember many women attending, although this changed with the creation of Women’s Committees, after which women attended as representatives of their local’s committee. Eventually, there was a large representation of women. She was always well respected at conferences she attended, though she recalls with a smile one BC Fed officer telling her, “You know, I really try to like you, but I can’t”, to which she replied, “I’m a thorn in your side, aren’t I?”

35:32 – 36:16

Muriel reflects on her career with CUPE. She feels the union did a good job of representing members and jokes she has walked the length of BC on picket line duties. She was a leader during a time when unions were being eroded, and she sees the same thing happening today. “They’re trying to take away everything that we really worked so hard to get in the first place”. The governments were never sympathetic, though she found it harder to deal with the Social Credit government.

36:17 – 38:48

After her term as President, Muriel continued to attend conventions at the provincial and national level, though she was glad to say goodbye to the time commitment. Her and her husband were dancers in their spare time, and she often missed out on this and other family activities because of her job. Mike Dumler was the first paid full-time President. Muriel recalls working with Bernice Kirk, who was “steadfast” and very good at her job, like many other women in the organization. Muriel credits her training as a

Toastmistress, a hobby she took up while staying home to raise her kids, with providing her leadership skills. She feels the CUPE BC Women's Committee provided these same skills to many other women.

38:49 – 40:23

In this part of the interview, Muriel reflects on the state of unions and women in the labour movement in BC today. Irene Lanzinger was elected the first female and current President of the BC Federation of Labour almost 40 years after Muriel was elected first female President of CUPE BC, and women are becoming more active. Muriel credits this with women being more involved in the workplace in general, and she thinks this is wonderful. "Women have a lot to contribute; I'm not segregating between men and women, because men are wonderful too. But I think that they've realized that they can do a job that maybe they couldn't before, and they have strengths that men don't have, just like men have strengths that women don't have".

40:24 – 44:52

Muriel became involved with the NDP in the 1970's as well, and ran for local office in 1979. "It was a real introduction... but there's nothing, no better training to become a parliamentarian or to be part of a government than unions, because it's a very tough role." She describes the trade union movement as a great training ground. She finishes the interview by sharing a message for women inside and outside the movement today, "you wouldn't have what you've got today if it wasn't for the work of the people in the trade union movement... whether you're in a union or not". Muriel was offered to join various labour organizations over the years after leaving CUPE, but always declined. She points out that the Status of Women likely wouldn't have happened without the labour movement, and helped to convince Grace McCarthy to begin a Status of Women inquiry at the national level.

44:53 – 46:43

In the last clip, Muriel talks briefly about negotiating for municipal pensions when she was President, a significant gain and one of her proudest accomplishments, which members still benefit from today.