

**Interview: George Brandak [GB]**

**Interviewer: Allen Seager [AS]**

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**Transcription: Blossom Cheng and Donna Sacuta**

AS: [00:00:06] Okay, George, it's good to see you. This is George Brandak, one of the key figures in the archival history of labour in British Columbia. Worked at the University of British Columbia, Rare Books and Special Collections for the better part of 40 years. My name is Alan Seager. I'm from the rival university, SFU, but George and I have always been friends. And one thing I learned when I was active in graduate teaching is that anybody doing a thesis or a major research project on BC labour history had to get to know the UBC archives and the people running the archives. So let's start George. Tell us a little bit about your background and how you got into the game of history and libraries and things like that.

GB: [00:01:13] Well, I was raised in Regina and I graduated from the University of Regina, one of its early back in 1966, I was offered a contract position to do a thousand significant dates in Saskatchewan history that required going through newspapers and other items in the Saskatchewan archives at the legislative building. And that meant meeting Alan Turner, who said, George, the Alberta archives are just beginning they've just hired their first archivist. Would you go for an interview? Apparently, I made a good impression, so I was hired. And so I worked with the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton from 66 to 69. I then thought that as research person, I really should get a master's thesis in history. So I felt this would be an advantage to do that because I'm dealing with a lot of graduate students and the public. So I went to receive a fellowship to go to at that time, was Waterloo Lutheran University. But by the time I finished my thesis, it was it was Wilfrid Laurier, which was the first person to receive an MA in history from there. In the meantime, from 71 to 73, I worked in the University of Saskatchewan archives with Stan Hanson, and we noticed there was an advertisement, Judy Combs, who was who was a previous manuscripts archivist at UBC had left. And I went for an interview. And I was fortunate enough to mention my including my interest in the labour movement, in the socialist movement, which was a very strong component of their archives. And I was fortunate enough to get the position I began in September of 1973.

AS: [00:03:12] OK, thank you very much. So let's recap where UBC's mandate and mission was at that time. We should all understand that for many years the University of British Columbia was really the center of higher learning post-secondary in the province. And they had progressive leaders, but they also had many connections with business and elite groups in the province. Do you have anything to add to how you personally navigated the politics of of the University of British Columbia?

GB: [00:03:59] Well, since the university archives to look after the records of the university and this was Special Collections at that time, of course, it wasn't Rare Books, it was just the Special Collections.

GB: [00:04:09] And people like Professor Dr Young and I mentioned Keith Ralston. Other people had never navigated records of the left to UBC. And its job is to try to continue building and preserving what there is on your strengths. So that meant in that case, you would continue building, in this case mining, fishing and forestry. And it's interesting that as

well as the records of unions, if you look at B.C. Packers and you look you can look and see by looking at the fishing records of the Japanese and the indigenous people, you get in quite a bit of working-class history from there. You could have a researcher would come in and say, look, I am Japanese, but you see, I was born in this Japanese hut in Rivers Inlet in nineteen such and such. So, it's a lot of broad social history within the records, within company records. But with the fishing industry, of course, we would have all the early union records where there is well and all you would get .... In a house, all the house being torn down, they open up the paper underneath all these letters from Bones Bays Factory whereas a Chinese person was writing letters how his experiences were there. Then they were translated into English. But basically, I guess there was a dispute with Mine-Mill. Somehow the records have said all the Mine-Mill material ended up here. We managed to send Sudbury back to Sudbury in a long time, but the Mine-Mill and before that the earlier material, the One Big Union material is all was even the early gavel of a union meeting because there and early photos. So that the basis of the collection was from there and forestry and fishing and then other material accumulated moving right up into the Solidarity material which Kuehn and all the records that the BC Fed had all came to us.

AS: [00:06:50] What you are referring to, Larry.

GB: [00:06:52] Larry Kuehn yes. BCTF. So that was very, very useful. So that was it. Continually working on that, as well as the CCF and NDP papers would be coming.

AS: [00:07:09] All right. Let's talk about the CCF and the NDP records for a few moments. You mentioned Walter Young. That's the late Walter Young. He planned on writing an exhaustive history of socialism in British Columbia, as far as I remember, that never got beyond the manuscript stage, but he certainly collected vast amounts of material. And could you clarify his role in spark-plugging the collection of CCF and NDP records?

GB: [00:07:50] Yes. His role was to get the records of the CCF clubs and constituencies across the whole province together, in one place, and also meeting various people like Dorothy Gretchen Steeves and convincing them to donate their material and their experiences to Special Collections. So, he was a catalyst that basically started building with that. And the labour worked around it. Because with 1961 with the CCF, with the labour movement became the NDP. And we continued with that and with the support of various politicians, some big names, some minor cabinet ministers like Gary Lauk would donate their paper. There was a big concern. The newspapers were saying, why do we keep. Why do we keep that junk? You see, and a President came to me and where he had to explain just to keep it quiet and the fuss will go away. I think it was politicians do things [laughter]. But basically, Walter was a key. And certainly the contacts continued with people, people like Keith Ralston and Resnick, of course, in political science.

AS: [00:09:29] Phil Resnick political science.

GB: [00:09:29] Phil Resnick and Mark Thompson, because he thought the commerce people should know more about labour. Every year I would put up a labour history display in the concourse of the Commerce Building and speak to the students about the B.C. labour movement, especially in mining and the One Big Union and the early Western Federation of Miners and show them examples of the charters and the letters etc. of the early labour movement. And that with the students as well.

AS: [00:10:10] Oh, that's very interesting.

GB: [00:10:14] I would do that. Yeah. The outreach was to the public and to the students, the show-and-tell on how you use material. Some of it is labour material. Some of it is right now, I'm sure if it's off of labour. But Justin Trudeau's as you know, he lived with his grandparents for much of the time. So in grade 5 he'd come back from school and from vacation. And what did you do during a vacation? So he has so neatly written a letter. He was about 10 at the time. How he and his mother went to visit Disneyland. But that was nothing compared to Montezuma's Revenge at Knott's Berry Farm. And then visit relatives, and come in. You see, so that when that letter goes to a source, it came in with a lot of the Sinclair material. Because was leader of the Liberal Party in B.C., but also an airplane pilot over in North Africa during World War 2. So it's why surprisingly, you do get a lot of incidental labour material where you don't expect it to come from. But so that's how we start building from strength and keep speaking to individual people like the IWA would be. You need to get the pre-IWA material. So that's important to see Harold Pritchett. When I went to visit to pick up his material and he was quite elderly at the time and he was saying, well, yes, the CCF has stolen our thunder. We had done all this work for the working class and they are now taking the credit you see. So, he was kind of disappointed in his career. But you can document where the decisions that they made to do certain things they didn't quite work out for them.

AS: [00:12:17] Yes, Harold Pritchett led the not very successful breakaway Canadian union in the early 50s, perhaps ahead of its time, that concept. But what a privilege that must have been to actually meet people like Harold Pritchett. Perhaps not in his heyday, but at least you did get to see them.

GB: [00:12:44] Yes, I have to that. And then with the CCF, Mackenzie I was able to meet people who were within the brain trust behind the scenes, the idealists as well, as well as the politicians.

AS: [00:13:01] People like Jim McKenzie.

GB: [00:13:04] Yes, Jim McKenzie. So I do remember going to the 25th anniversary of the first NDP government. Jim says to me, George can you do me a favour? We're going to sit with the Nanaimo MP because after the Bingogate scandal, no one wants to sit with him anymore. So I said, Yeah, that's fine with me. That's fine with me. So I got to meet all sorts of interesting people.

AS: [00:13:38] Yes. That was a reference to old Dave Stupich.

GB: [00:13:41] Yes, it was.

AS: Who had been the treasurer of the Boag Foundation that Jim Mackenzie had headed for so many years. I would have sat with you too. But they had roped me into giving a brief talk.

GB: [00:14:02] Yes I remember that.

AS: [00:14:03] That was quite something, indeed. Just to recap for the benefit of those who were listening. Somebody like Walter Young. His heyday was in the 1960s. Am I correct?

GB: [00:14:19] Yes. And even before then actually.

AS: [00:14:21] Right. So he was associated with people who were involved in the CCF when it was the CCF prior to 1961. And he had been personally involved in the New Party project of the late 1950s. My impression, George. And this needs to be puzzled out by somebody is that Jim McKenzie and Walter Young had all been on the same side at one point in the 50s, but later parted company, and that's one of many reasons why Walter's work was incomplete. Getting, establishing the foundation for these records of the political left.

AS: [00:15:17] The three industries you mentioned, plus the institutional frame of labour. That's a very solid foundation. What do you think the future is for labour archives.

GB: [00:15:34] Well, we've been trying to have the archives. There is more professional archivists in the world now through the graduate school at UBC. It would be nice to have unions establish their own archives instead of put them into a place or at least there's the Vancouver City, there's UBC, there's SFU, or have someone develop a record management system which they are now we're all doing. They can decide what to keep and destroy. In our past microfilm or your other means of preserving the records. So there shouldn't be a problem. Yeah. I want people to do digitizing is very important is into now. So there's a lot with new technology space shouldn't be a problem and the knowledge is there. Whether the finances are there for each is always a question.

AS: [00:16:49] But this is a very important point because what you're suggesting is that the era of the one big institution is kind of over. What we need to do is think of decentralizing the expertise.

GB: [00:17:03] Yes, because with the one big institution can get through digitizing and film other records when they want them. But it would be nice the records are there for their members and for people interested in that union or that sector or whatever. So that's where I think where we're moving. Whereas in the past, we had a few very, very dedicated people. Art Kube was one of those who was very historically minded as well. He just recently passed away who was quite a supporter of archives. So, I'm trying to remember the names of many people who contacted me, who said something our union or this person is interesting. He has some material. Can you come and take a look at it? I wasn't as well prepared for this, so I can't remember that many names.

AS: [00:18:17] Just think about some names. Art Kube was kind of mentored by Larry Wagg. Did you ever run into.

GB: [00:18:23] Yes, I remember Larry Wagg. But I also remember that he did come in from Czechoslovakia to try to curb Mine-Mill or switch Mine-Mill from a communist led union. Yeah, to Steel. So that was kind of interesting in itself. But still Mine-Mill was the bulk of the records there. And then with the IWA after Pritchett, it was also quite important. And in fishing the unions would be the records are quite good for the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union.

AS: [00:19:15] I remember.

GB: [00:19:21] Except that Griffin would say is that bourgeois historian Ralph Keith Ralston still there. We're not going to give anything there. Finally.

AS: [00:19:31] So George is referring to the red thread throughout all this.

GB: [00:19:35] Oh, yes, the red thread.

AS: [00:19:41] The old IWA prior to 1949 and the Mine-Mill.

GB: [00:19:47] Because post '45 I think all but about three unions were all basically controlled by the red threads, the industrial unions were much more powerful than they are now.

AS: [00:20:01] And Professor Ralston. He had been an activist within the Communist Party but had parted company with them. So some of the Griffin clan was still part of the movement. Yeah. So you had to somehow at least you had to be aware of the sensitivities around politics. Perhaps we could just show the viewers. Here's an example of of the research that has emerged out of the Mine-Mill collection. Ron Verzuh an old activist in labour now retired wrote a PhD thesis on the history of Mine-Mill in Trail and he's published one of many articles in the Pacific Northwest Quarterly and that kind of work would not be possible without the archival trove.

GB: [00:21:00] It would be nice if we had one of the old One Big Union charters to show people. They were reminded me I started beginning mentioning union material in the companies, well a huge collection we have is the BC Electric Railway material from the company and there's a magazine. And there's a lot to do with unionizing in the BC Electric Railway.

AS: [00:21:27] And just to explain to people who might be watching the connections, at least among an older generation of historians. The person who first studied the B.C. Electric records was Patricia Roy. Who then went on to be the trailblazing historian of Asian minority issues in British Columbia. So from the point of view of somebody like Pat Roy, she was not splitting hairs about institutional history, ethnic history, social history.

GB: [00:22:03] They were all part of a holistic approach. If you want to use that kind of phrase and again, without the records that enabled her to do some original research back in the day, that getting on that path would have been a lot more difficult.

GB: [00:22:28] See and with Special Collections, but also in addition to the huge print collection, would have all the theses that were produced at UBC or if it was labour related we would bring it elsewhere from other institutions and it was sitting there. Since that time, we've moved the theses to a different location. But it sort of became a center. I do remember in my early days, the 70s with Dave Bercusson and myself would travel to various conferences in Seattle and Calgary and elsewhere where he would discuss the One Big Union and the early miners development, and I would discuss sources of the early labour movement that people can use. I actually did that at Duke University, believe it or not. I think it was 1983 or something.

AS: [00:23:24] So that was a kind of a roadshow with a labour historian and George representing the archival side and you go from coast to coast of Canada and the United States, a very important contribution. You mentioned material objects. How important do you think those are? You mentioned the possibility of getting students intrigued by something to look at. A charter, a banner, buttons

GB: [00:23:54] But yes, they do. If they do, like I mentioned, One Big Union posters and the standard that, you know, the pyramid the pyramid poster, uh, you know, the capitalist

at the top, the proletariat, right at the bottom. Those are quite memorable for people. The graphics in those days are very good, despite the fact we've improved technically.

GB: [00:24:29] So even looking at individual letters of people, whether they're World War One letters or people writing a letter to their family from probably interior from a small mine. Yeah. It was a visual effect is good especially. Oh for the world war, the posters I guess these days the health people would like the posters that say eat less bread, send it to the front. You see, so you have the posters. So you know, it is all over the place, it is defined not just by the labour movement, but by workers everywhere.

AS: [00:25:26] Well, you mentioned things coming out of walls. We have no idea what is out there.

AS: [00:25:38] Certainly the Burnaby Museum where I volunteer virtually every day, there's some new tranche of photographs. And then it was the case that I remember somebody down in Surrey found a letter. I think you and I talked about this some years ago, a letter to one of their ancestors signed by William Lyon Mackenzie King.

AS: [00:26:10] It was a letter he had written to the president of District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America. The founding president. Frank Sherman. Who we know died in 1909. So this letter would have been around 1907 somewhere in there.

GB: [00:26:31] He was the Minister of Labour.

AS: [00:26:31] He was the Minister of Labour. But regardless of how interested the members of his family were in their, the union side of their family, they were aware of the significance of Mackenzie King and their ability to , gee, that's a significant name, triggered the process that we were able to get a little bit of correspondence from Sherman who otherwise all we have on Sherman is newspaper accounts.

GB: [00:27:08] So most of my career, I guess, is divided into one acquiring material for our mandate, which is one reason I would. And for the MacMillan Bloedel there's a lot of records there. But the material has to be much of this has to be closed for 10, 15 years because of recent material. And they would be concerned about that. And I would see Geoff Mynett and have lunch with him and discuss it. And then he would get a National Archival Appraisal Board appraisal of some material, which then they could use for tax purposes for their huge donation. They would be interested, which is one reason because I'm dealing with all sorts of people I would during my period I never became a member of any political party. I mean, that's something that Geoff Mynett would hint at. Whereas when I first met Jack Munro, the first thing he said, what are your politics? I don't want any right-winger looking after our records. He's a fine man. Really, really enjoyed working with Jack.

AS: [00:28:18] So Mynett was worried that you were an NDPer and Jack Munro was worried that you were a Social Crediter. And I suppose.

GB: [00:28:28] Oh, no, no. it worked out well. It worked out well. Yeah, it worked out well with.

AS: [00:28:34] George remained non-partisan.

GB: [00:28:39] Yes.

AS: [00:28:40] Your contribution would not have been enhanced by narrow partisanship.

GB: [00:28:52] People had to have different, different views. There was a prominent archivist in Victoria who was a treasurer in the district for the NDP and he thought he could do his politics, but he had a different position than I had.

GB: [00:29:07] So anyways, I still did not cross the picket lines when UBC went on strike. That's just my belief. Anyways, aside from acquiring material, I would assist researchers in doing it and we saw that we'd have to get people to assist in processing it. I mean, I would love to process material and prepare a finding aid for the people who use it. But I'm one person and you know, that's a big place. You don't get you do get grants. And then you do have students who do work for their practicum for you. By and large, things get done. But because of that, as I said, it's a big backlog. Some institutions have difficulty handling things, even the provincial archives of BC. There's a limit to what one can acquire. What's your priority is? That's why to preserve material, I'd like to see more local people being involved because with their interest they can pass it on to other people who see it. And then we can get a greater appreciation of our labour heritage.

AS: [00:30:31] For the benefit of union people might be listening in, can we just mention the name of the program out at UBC that trains librarians and archivists? And the possibilities of getting temporary student.

GB: [00:31:02] It's the Archives and Information Studies at the library school. It's not called library school anymore but I can't remember the name. But in any case, the go to place would be that one see Luciana Duranti anyways.

GB: [00:31:20] One thing we might think about doing this series is something a little bit more visual with the, um, banners and charters and things like that.

AS: [00:31:38] So we can talk about who I can talk to over at the library today. You know, it was it was there now and perhaps you could help us out with that.

GB: [00:31:50] The City archives also has a good collection of city and street photos that include workers. Our photo collection side. It is more print material than photo material at Special Collections. But there is the photo material of course. It's a smaller amount, but it's there. You just have to give it. I haven't given it is as much thought as I should, but yes, it makes sense to have the visual material to go with the textual material.

AS: [00:32:31] Do you have any thoughts on the way the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre can think about doing in terms of a mission or mandate going forward?

GB[00:32:46] Well, I think that's been pretty well defined. I was at the meetings when it started at the beginning. And I think that it seems to me the job is what is moving along quite, quite well. An executive director, you have a program of oral histories, you have a program of contact with various institutions. So my experience is projects and projects. People tend to want to join an organization when they get a project to do something. If you narrow in on a certain event or a certain time period where you want the person who's interested. Oh yeah, I want to find out more about my grandfather who was involved in that. Or myself. So that's one way to go to get more volunteers.

A.S: [00:33:52] So in our experience, we've heard a lot of good ideas that went nowhere here is an example of an idea that is really starting to get some flesh and bones.

GB[00:34:02] Yes, I think I think it's.

AS: [00:34:07] Well, thank you very much George.

GB[00:34:08] You're most welcome.