

SD: Could you start by telling me your name and where you were born.

JG: My name is Joan Gillatt. I was born in Victoria in 1924.

SD: So, you're from a B.C. family.

JG: Yes.

SD: Are you married?

JG: Yes.

SD: When did you marry?

JG: Nineteen years ago today.

SD: Oh, happy anniversary.

JG: Thank you.

SD: So, you were unmarried during the 1930's and 40's.

JG: That's right.

SD: When did you begin to work?

JG: 1942.

SD: Had you looked for work before that?

JG: No.

SD: Why did you decide to look for work?

JG: I had completed one year of university and I wanted to go on to further university training and it was necessary to get some money to do that.

SD: Did you have difficulty finding a job?

JG: No.

SD: Where did you look for work?

→ JG: My brother had just joined the Air Force and had left a job at the Dominion Bank and I went into the Dominion Bank. *Beginning ↓*

[ SD: What were the conditions like at the Bank. What kind of work did you do there? ]

JG: I was a junior clerk and I got \$65 a month. The working conditions were not bad although we were expected to work fairly long hours helping with the three balance days a month, [ into the evening, ] and we didn't get paid overtime [ or anything of that sort. ]

SD: Was it mostly women who worked there or was it men? ]

JG: We were all temporary staff. All the junior staff were women at that point, but it was war time and we had taken over men's jobs temporarily. The bank at that time did not hire women on permanent staff.

[ SD: Was this the first time that women had actually entered <sup>the</sup> banking industry? ]

JG: There was one women there as a secretary who had started work during the first world war and had been kept on, but they were very rare.

SD: Was there any discussion at all of organization there?

JG: None at all.

SD: After you worked at the bank, where did you then move on to? ]

→ JG: I was offered a job at the office in the Department of Mines for the Provincial Government. Again, as a war time replacement. ↓

SD: What year was that?

JG: 1943.

SD: Can you describe the conditions and the wages there.

JG: By that time I was getting at the bank \$75 a month and I went to the provincial government at exactly the same rate. The hours were 9 to 5 and 9 to 12:30 on Saturdays but we got an hour and a quarter for lunch, so the hours weren't bad. The work was not particularly arduous. I was a lab assistant doing routine analysis of ores for strategic minerals. They were looking for ores that would be valuable in the war.

SD: Do you remember why you decided to change jobs.

JG: Oh yes. That was quite easy. I was interested in science and this was much more in keeping with the sort of work that I at that point hoped to go into.

SD: Was that the case with many young women at that time, that they would look for opportunities in terms of war time employment that they might not be able to get otherwise?

JG: Well of course the whole thinking of the nation was geared towards winning the war and you would step into anything that would be helpful in that effort.

SD: There was a real feeling of patriotism at that point.

JG: Oh, certainly yes.

SD: What kind of things did people do to support the war effort? Were there any special things that were done through the workplace to support, like bond drives...

JG: Yes, that was about the only thing that I can think

of though. I can't remember when we started the blood donor clinics. That was probably around the same time, but those were the main two things the blood donor clinics and the buying bonds.

Note

SD: Was this a permanent job that you had...

JG: No...

SD: oh, it was temporary...

JG: uh huh.

SD: How was it described as temporary. Did they tell you that you were going to be working there until the people whose jobs you had taken returned from the war.

JH: That's right.

SD: Was most of the workforce female at this point?

JG: <sup>The work force was</sup> About half and half [I guess.] Older men and females,

SD: Did the women who worked there, were they mostly young or older, or were they married or single do you remember any of that?

JG: Mostly young single women. \*

SD: Did you live with your family at that time?

JG: Yes.

SD: Did you have responsibilities around the home in terms of housework and ...

JG: No.

SD: Did you help to support your family with your wages?

JG: My father died just about then and that's why I kept on working rather than going back to university as I had planned to do. It was necessary that I help to support my mother and that I support myself.

[SD: Was this the job you had when you first became interested in organization?]

*Union*

[JG: Yes.] As a lab assistant I became what was called then the departmental representative, which was more or less analogous to a shop steward, for the Department of Mines and at that point we didn't have checkoff and I used to go around and collect the monthly fees from everybody and turn them into the union office.

[SD: Can you describe the process by which you became interested in the, I guess, the association at that point.]

[JG: I was talked into it by one of the older men in the Department who was anxious to get somebody else besides <sup>in</sup> himself interested working on the association and I became reasonably interested in it. It was a different sort of thing to do you know and, I became vice-president of the Victoria branch of the association almost by default because at 9:30 I was attending a meeting and they had no nominations in for vice-president and they had to be in by midnight that night and somebody talked me into it. Really <sup>my</sup> major interest started from that time on.

*post-war*

[Sd: Do you remember the kind of issues that you drew you into interest in the association at all?

JG: Kind of issues...

[SD: How did he talk you into it?]

[JG: Well, <sup>my</sup> interest really began at the point when the war was over and my job was no longer secure, you know]

*post-war*

... the men were coming back. [ I got a job, ] I transferred within the Mines Department into the filing office, and it was obvious that we needed a union. That our working conditions were inferior, particularly women's working conditions. Not so much in that they didn't pay. They paid equal money for equal work but the equal work wasn't available. There were just no opportunities for advancement for women unless they had particular skills mainly in social work or some definite field that women were accepted in. Of course we weren't the only people discriminated against. At the time that I was hired they didn't hire anybody other than Caucasians. There's a large Chinese population in Victoria, none of them were hired in the civil service until well after the war.

[ SD: Was that like an unwritten policy?

JG: Yes. ] There was nothing written that precluded women from higher administrative jobs or anything of that sort but they never got them.

[ SD: So there was no legislation for example, against married women taking certain kinds of positions, because there was in the federal public service.

JG: I can't recall that there were any.

SD: So you had gone from having essentially a technical or technicians job to a filing position?

JG: Yes.

SD: And did you feel that that was in a way, a coming down in terms of your job aspirations, the kinds of hopes

*union*

you'd had for developing an understanding of science?

JG: My experience in the assay office had lessened my enthusiasm for a career in science and I was uncertain as to what role I wanted to do but I knew it was something more connected with people than that sort of ivory tower scientist existence. I wasn't sure, you know, what I wanted to do until I became really interested in the union work and that seemed the field that satisfied my ambitions really more than the job satisfaction. The job was a pleasant enough one in the filing office. After a couple of years there I was in charge of it with a staff of four people under me and it was very pleasant work.

SD: In what ways did the union work fulfill your ambitions in terms of being able to <sup>do</sup> social kinds of work with people? Can you talk about that a little bit.

JG: The civil service mentality at that time was very difficult to deal with. The association as it was then called, not a union, was called an association because the people weren't willing to accept total concept of unionization. [They were not a union.] We had a lot of older people, a lot of young girls who unlike myself were not interested in fighting for union rights, and it was mainly in that field that there was satisfaction for me; in selling this as a concept to the people I was working with, to show them that a straight person like myself really felt that we had to get in there and fight,

That it wasn't enough to accept the paternalistic sort of handouts that we got from the government, that just because this was made a fairly soft job didn't mean that we had to be quiet about everything and accept all these easy things. I very much resented the sort of things they would hand us, like long holidays at Christmas. We would get an extra day more than anybody else, you see, and the people would all say "Oh, what a soft touch all those civil servants have, you know, those government employees don't work hard at all." Whereas we had to show them that we were willing to accept labour conditions and it was selling that idea to all the rest of my fellow workers that was challenging and rewarding.

SD: Did the government tend to foster an attitude that because you were civil servants it was a service kind of occupation. That you were serving tax payers and that because of that you shouldn't push for your rights as workers. Was it that kind of attitude?

JG: There was something of the same sort of attitude as there was during the war, That you were being disloyal to your country, to your King that was, if you made waves at all as far as labour rights were concerned.

SD: Did that continue in the post war period as well?

JG: Yes. But I think that the union did a lot to break that sort of feeling down without totally being against it because who can be against loyalty to one's country and one's province or anything of that sort.

SD: When did the organization of the association begin?

JG: Prior to my time. Just a few years. My sister had been working at the Parliament Buildings before that, she had joined, not quite at the beginning, my cousin had been in it I guess right from the start. But I knew all those people who had started it, they were still very active at the time <sup>that</sup> I came along.

SD: Was your family a family that was supportive of trade unionism?

JG: No. My sister got her job at the Buildings under political patronage, as most people did in those days.

SD: [ How did most people see the relationship between the political patronage and organizing an association or a union? ]

JG: <sup>Most people</sup> They really didn't look at <sup>patronage</sup> it much you know. You worked with the system as it was and that's why I say that my major job, or what I saw as my major job was raising people's consciousness as to what rights they did have and that you weren't being a terribly pushy person to expect your rights.

SD: Did you try to argue to people to be autonomous from whichever party was in government at that time as civil servants? Because I could imagine that patronage could be a really serious problem in terms of seniority and a whole series of questions that would be negotiating issues for a trade union. I'm just wondering how you would get around that.

JG: I don't know that we got around it really. We worked with what was there and when the system was collective begging that's the sort of thing we did.

SD: How organized was the B.C. Government Employee's Association when you first became organized. How many workers did it have under its wing and at what stage was the organization?

JG: There were a few hundred members in Victoria, there was something over a thousand members in the province. I can remember quite clearly just shortly before I left that there were over a thousand members in Victoria and that there were ten thousand members in the province. It had gone up to that in the fifteen years that I had been there.

SD: Were you involved in organizing?

JG: No. Other than to sign up members within my own Department.

SD: But there was sort of an organizing drive going on over those years.

JG: Well, just through the departmental representatives. That's how it was done.

SD: That's how the union spread to more and more people.

JG: Yes.

SD: Did the civil service grow also in that period?

JG: Yes.

SD: So, that in part accounts for the ...

JG: Yeah, the main reason the association grew that much

was that we had a medical services plan under the union. And to get into it you had to be a member of the union and lots of people joined just for that.

SD: So, how did you go about negotiating contracts? Was the association recognized by the employer?

JG: Yes, yes.

SD: How did you win recognition?

JG: Just be going and talking to the Cabinet. We presented briefs to the Cabinet and during the early years when I was in it they were established just <sup>by</sup> consent as the bargaining agent for the civil service and they made direct representations to the Civil Service Commission on wages but it was really the Cabinet that had to be convinced of the necessity for further funds and it got to the point during the course of that fifteen years where the Cabinet would decide how much money was to be allotted to civil servants' wages and the association and the Civil Service Commission worked it out between them as to how these funds were to be allotted.

SD: So, were medical benefits part of the issues that were negotiated?

JG: No, no. / Medical benefits, the association rather hated to lose them. The government just took them over as an arbitrary thing. The reason they hated to lose them was because that was a good tool for getting membership in the association. But they at the same time gave us voluntary checkoff scheme, which they

later took away again but that did help us keep some of the bulk of our members in.

SD: What were the other issues that were negotiated in the contract? Were there written contracts?

JG: No, no.

SD: It was all word of mouth agreement?

JG: Yes. Superannuation was a big issue and we changed the total superannuation act. I was on that committee so I'm quite familiar with that one. Various other working conditions regarding temporary staff, conditions in some of the institutions which were particularly bad were discussed and negotiated on a collective bargaining basis, you know. Our big issue in my day, of course was a collective agreement and recognition as a union. We planned to go on strike for a collective bargaining agreement and at the last minute the government offered us Chief Justice Sloan as a one-man commission to make a report on bargaining rights for B.C. government employees and we accepted that because that had been a proposal the previous year at our convention as a step towards getting bargaining rights. And we had the verbal agreement of Mr. Bennett and all of his Cabinet that whatever Chief Justice Sloan recommended they would in turn recommend to the next session of the Legislature. And it was just shortly after that that we accepted that and called off the strike.

SD: What year was that?

JG: 1957, somewhere around there. Then they appointed, gave Justice Sloan some juicy government appointment so that he had to withdraw from doing that and with the association's agreement they appointed in his place Professor Carruthers from U.B.C. That of course delayed the report being made and it was completed the following year and they never made it public, it wasn't made public until the N.D.P. took office.

SD: What kind of effect did that have on the association?

JG: They went on a one day strike and they took out an injunction against them about picketing in public places and that effectively killed the strike. We were very, very dubious about whether that strike would have come off in the first place had we actually called it because Victoria was the weak part of the union. There was a feeling among the civil service there that you're right under the gun. I was sure that I was going to be fired at that point because I was at that time first vice-president of the provincial body and I was sure they were going to fire the ringleaders. But this strike was settled without us being fired, but it was such a terrible feeling throughout the Building the people who had been ready to go out on strike and the ones who were quite determined to break it and from the ministerial level on down there was this awful dissension. The terrible feeling of not trusting one another. Just as an example of the sort of thing that