

SD: Let's go through some of the preliminary information.

Can you give me your name?

BS: Well, Bertha Souderholm, and I came into Webster's Corners as this place was known at that time, in 1929. And I was 10 and a half years old at that time and came with my parents that had arrived from Finland the year before to Alberta. Well, 1929 Webster's Corners was nearly all Finnish community because it had been settled by the Finnish speaking people years gone by, known as *Somentokoyaut*, it has quite a history which most of the historians know about. Well, at that time, the men worked in the bush, loggers and sawmill workers, or whatever type of work that they could have, and then they farmed on the side. While the men were out at their jobs, the women, they manned the homes, they milked the cows, they raised the chickens, they raised the children, and also took part in the activities of the community, and that is the culture end of it. The hall was the main centre of all activities and organizing and this type, and that included concerts and plays and things like that, and this was done all on their spare time, after their hours of work at home. And then in wintertime mostly the men were home because the woods were closed on account of the snow and that way. The, and then of course 1930, '35, '36, there was those hard years down here, but the

BS: (cont) people in Webster's Corners as I call it, they weren't as hard hit as the ones in Vancouver, that they always had their own vegetables and their potatoes and chickens and meat and things like that, that they had food, but they were very, very short on money. And that was to be used very carefully.

SD: Did people deal with that by forming co-ops?

BS: Yes, Webster's Corners had co-ops and they did *the best* with them, and then of course as the years went by, well, the co-ops were *obsolete* and they died *so* called a natural death.

SD: When did people organize cooperatives?

BS: That was, Webster's Corners *Coop*, I guess, that was in 1930, wasn't it, Uno?

US: Yeah, somewhere like that.

BS: And that was still, oh, about 15 years ago when it closed.

SD: Were you involved at all in the organizing of the coops?

BS: Well, I was so young at that time, but later on then, when I married and I was gone for four and a half years from Webster's Corners and then we came back, and then like my husband Uno, well then he was manager of one of the *coops* for nearly two years and I worked as a year and a half as a clerk in the *coop* at that time. But then it became absolutely impossible to operate it because of previous misfortunes with management that it ran into

BS: (cont) a hole and it just could not survive from that so it was foreclosed.

SD: Right. And Webster's Corners was primarily a working-class community, was it?

BS: Yes, yes. Mostly loggers and farmers and fishermen.

SD: Right. People came from Finland and was there a strong political life in the community? Were people -- one of the things that Mrs. Person mentioned was that there were very clear sort of political lines in your community.

BS: Yes, they were all to the, more or less to the Left, the socialist.

SD: Okay, so would the cultural life be focused around Left cultural events?

BS: Yes.

SD: Okay, what kinds of things did people do, you were talking a bit about concerts, and . . . ?

BS: Oh, they have three-act plays, and those plays would take on either a political side or a humorous side or just . . . drama or whatever, operettas if they had enough singers and things like that.

SD: And were there women's organizations?

BS: Yes, always as far back as I remember and way before my time when I arrived here, the women have always had an organization of their so-called own, and it's been known by many different names, and then during the Depression years

BS: (cont) there was a Women's Defense League working to raise money and all that for the ones that were picked up for legal reasons, well, then that time was not needed, that was not needed anymore so it's changed its form to something else. And during the wartime they worked for Red Cross and then they worked for gathering clothes for Finland and then, of course, the Vietnam war, now, they did tremendous amount of work to supply needed goods and sewing goods and money raised and all that for the cause in Vietnam. And right now then the Vietnam crisis is more or less not over, but over as far as our group is concerned so now we are working for the peace movement.

SD: Right.

BS: And we meet regularly every month, and all this women's organization it must be, oh, 50 years old.

SD: Did most of the women in the community belong to the organization?

BS: At one time, say, three quarters of it, but now of course it has dwindled down as far as the Finnish population has dwindled, most of them have passed on, and they are so old they cannot take part, but we still have a very small group but it's active in its way.

SD: Right. Why did you yourself start to work, when did you start to work and why?

BS: Well, then, like my husband he did odd jobs, he was a logger, he was a fisherman, he was a trucking and this and that, wherever he could bring in a dollar or two. Well then our children, we have two children, a boy and a girl, well then they got to be at that age where I was able to leave them more or less by themselves. Well, then I entered Berry land here, and it's only a little ways that I was home at 6 o'clock and I left at 7:30 or 7:00 in the morning, so that I was home here while Uno, he was either logging or fishing that I was home with the children, you see. But this work, of course, was seasonal because it had to do with these fruits and vegetables, later on, you see.

SD: When was that, was this during the Depression?

BS: No, that was after, it was after the Depression or the Depression was beginning to lift, that it was in 1942 that I worked at the mill and it was after 1942 that I entered Berry land.

SD: Were the mills organized when you worked there?

BS: They were, weren't they, Uno?

US: No, they weren't.

BS: They weren't, eh? But it was 1942, that's the time anyway the working people were demanding unemployment insurance, for the people and it was 1942 that it more or less came into effect because that's the time I got my first social security number.

SD: Did the organizations, this is returning back a bit, during the Depression did the organizations in the community do any work around fighting for unemployment insurance and also relief funds?

BS: Yes -- old age pension, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation, family allowance, and the medical, even the medicare, what we call medicare now. All these, they go always on their lists for demands for the betterment of the people in general.

SD: Right. A lot of people don't realize that those things were won in fact because of the struggles . . .

BS: The younger generation, now, you take -- it's quite surprising like some time ago we had a discussion about family allowance. They didn't have a clue that the family allowance has been fought for, they thought that it was just dished out by the government by their kindness.

SD: So you started to work, I guess, in 1942, and then you went off to Berryland. What were the conditions like?

BS: At Berryland? It was hard work, and it was piece work. And piece work, of course, its just like a bull whip being used on the people. The more you get into the cans the more wages you make, and I can't remember exactly what we were paid per dozen. I myself ^{was} more or less in the end of carrying and punching the card for women that were filling the cans, and then my job was to carry them and stack the

BS: (cont) trays and then help to put them on the belt. At those days the canning process was ancient, ^{is} as it ^{is} all modernized right now, that there's no comparison. But it was all carrying on trays.

SD: Was it hand-filling?

BS: Yes.

SD: And did people work very long hours?

BS: Well, we had the eight hours, and sometimes some of us had to work, say, nine hours, but it was mostly the eight hours. But then if there wasn't any fruit you were called in, and if you worked only an hour or two, well, that is all that you got paid for, was for that two hours there was no extra pay for call out time.

SD: Right. So what sort of prompted people to ~~begin organizing?~~

BS: Well, out of a group of women now, you have ~~the~~ the ones that hate unions and ones that are for unions, and out of those there were a few of us that knew that if we could get a union in ^{that} we would get better conditions that way. And I think there were about four of us that began to casually talk amongst the women on lunch hours that we should have it organized. Well, of course being green and all that, you didn't know exactly how to go about it, but anyway as time went on, ~~We~~ We found out a way that if we get in contact with a local in Vancouver, that I can't remember the organization that was at that time looking after the

BS: (cont) food workers. And from there we finally got hold of a man that came out to talk to us and through that little start, well, we were finally able to get a union started and our first contract was signed. The contract, of course, wasn't anything to write home about but it was better than the conditions were, and it's from that then that it has progressed that today they have much better, although there are still quite a bit of improvements that could be made.

SD: Was it almost all women who worked there?

BS: Yes.

SD: And did most of the people work there as temporary workers?

BS: Well, they were all, we would call them seasonal/workers,

And at that time there was no seniority clause, if you get laid off well then a brand new one would take your place even if you had months of experience.

SD: And there were no provisions for health care or illness?

BS: No, no. Compensation they did have.

SD: Did most of the people who worked there come from this community?

BS: Most of them, yes.

SD: So people sort of knew each other outside of work?

BS: Yeah.

SD: Did that help in terms of organizing?

BS: Not really, no. Because in that way you could be neighbors

BS: (cont) and one is against and one is for, so you have your differences. And then when we finally got the union in there well we did have a clause ^{in there} that all have to pay union dues whether you signed up as a member or not. Well, there were quite a few of them, of course, that said, "I don't want to belong to the union and I do not want to pay the union dues." So ^{our} come back used to be, we'd say, "Well, if you don't want to pay your union dues, well you go and tell the boss that you don't want to take the gain, either, that was realized by the contract," well then of course that gave them a little different view on that, they thought that, "Well, I'm losing something," although they didn't want to pay that \$2 or whatever the union dues were per month, see. That they wanted the raise but they didn't want to pay.

SD: Right. What kind of things did you establish by unionizing, did you develop a seniority system there?

BS: That was, yes, later on, then. And they have a fairly good seniority there now.

SD: Is it still mostly seasonal [?] workers?

BS: No, now it has progressed that it's either on a very few members working but they were practically during the year now, They do everything now from blueberries to beans, and pork and beans and things like that, which at my time it was just strictly fruit.

SD: So were you involved in being a shop steward?

BS: Yes, I was, for a period of time.

SD: What kind of work did the stewards do?

BS: Well, we sort of supervised and took in complaints, see, being on piece work the shop steward's job was mostly, they had to watch that some of the women wouldn't go in there half an hour early to start doing the work while the others will start at one o'clock and they would go in at 11:30, deal, you know, anything that comes under a shop steward's . . .

SD: Did you collect the dues?

BS: No, we had a secretary for that.

SD: In terms of piece work, did people fight at any point to establish hourly wages?

BS: Well, of course that was, with the union and all that, it was gradually being fought to that point that the piece work was abolished.

SD: Right. Because the piece work would, I imagine, really undermine people's ability to create solidarity on the shop floor.

BS: Yes. And like I said piece work, you know, it's just like a whip, and instead of creating good will amongst each other, well, it was the one who had the sharpest elbow and was more aggressive, well, naturally they got ahead while the timid one would stand back and not get the box

BS: (cont) that was hers to be taken.

SD: Were you working there during the war?

BS: Um, '45 the end of the war, yes, yes I was, and then --
'45 -- I worked there till '56, '57 I went to Clemtu,
wasn't it? Mnm hmn.

SD: Was the food industry at all seen as essential to war
production? Was it treated that way?

BS: Not at Berryland, no.

SD: You were just canning fruit and stuff?

BS: Yeah.

SD: Do you remember publicity around women ^{as} war workers?
Was there a lot of publicity at that time? Did the image
of women as workers change somewhat during that period?

BS: Well, you see, down here, then again it didn't affect
us as it would have affected people in Vancouver or in
your post-war industries. See, we didn't have any war
industry here. And the ones that were interested in that,
well, naturally they left the area and they went to work in
the war industry, but as far as Berryland and all that,
well, the ones that had their families and all, well, the
women did not leave. But there was some single or some-
body like that that made the move, and tried to better
their livelihood that way, they left. But there was no,
no dissension or anything like that against the women in
that respect.

SD: Yeah, that's what I was sort of curious about, because I wondered if because it was a fairly progressive community whether people were quite open towards women working during the war.

BS: Oh, yes.

SD: And that was generally the case -- did most women work?

BS: Well, you couldn't say that most of them, but it was a section of women that did, you know.

SD: You said before that after you had left Berryland there was a struggle there when women were fired for organizing.

BS: Yes, that was a year after I left. Well then the union struggle was really the hottest issue there and three women were fired for union organizing which was at that time already against the rules of organized labor, that you're not supposed to be fired for union activities. But they were. I think one was taken back but as far as the other two were concerned, well, they were let go. But I was not there at that time anymore.

SD: Because a fair number of people from the community worked at Berryland, did the community get involved in the unionization process there, or ⁱⁿ any of the struggles that went on?

BS: Not really, no.

SD: No. You also said there was a wildcat.

BS: Oh, yeah, that was the first feeling, the first try, you

BS: (cont) know, after talking about trying to get more wages and trying to get a union, and not exactly knowing how to go about it, well it's one day we finally pulled off at noontime a wildcat strike, and we all didn't go back at one o'clock excepting three, three scabs went in and we stayed outside till the manager or owner of the Berryland came out and our wages at that time was 35¢ an hour, and we demanded 50¢. We got a five cent raise so we got 40¢.

SD: That was a victory.

BS: That was a victory, yes.

SD: And that helped to establish the union?

BS: Yes. And that more or less began to bring it in.

SD: Was the union you joined in the Trades and Labor Council or was it in the Canadian Congress of Labor? Was it an industrial union, or ?

BS: Berryland, it was a . . .

SD: Do you know which . . .

BS: AFL. American outfit, yes. The food workers.

SD: What kind of policy did it have in terms of, because there were a number of different labor bodies at that time, there was the Trades and Labor Council and the Canadian Labor Congress, and I wondered if at any time there were discussions around which group people should affiliate to, whether they wanted the Canadian unions, or . . .?

BS: No, this one, this local down here and the people being as weak as they were there wasn't any of that discussion at all.

SD: There was more like basic trade unionism?

BS: Yes.

SD: After you worked in the canning industry you were involved in the fishing industry?

BS: Yes, then Uno was a tenderman there, and then I got a job at Clemtu and that was a fish slimer or washer whatever you could call it. From there I progressed I did odds and ends of things, but I worked down there for nine seasons⁶ that too was seasonal work, so it involved two and a half months, one time was three months. It all depended on the amount of fish and how long the season was.

SD: And was that mostly women/workers?

BS: No, ^{it was a mixture,} there there was men and women.

SD: In the fishing industry, was there any discussion of equal pay for women?

BS: It was beginning to be, but not very strong at that time, which of course, that has progressed, later on.

SD: Also, you talked a little bit about how there were white workers and native workers . . .

BS: Yes. Well, see, like Clemtu now it was strictly, the can- nery was on native land, and their village was just a

BS: (cont) little ways, what was it -- about half a mile, from the cannery down there? And it was in the first year we were there well, there~~was~~ the red line on the sidewalk that the white man cannot cross that white line after ten o'clock in the evening, and all kinds of restrictions that way. And then of course in the cannery, you see, ^{the} native women they were working there and actually there were only about four or five of us white women there, so some of the natives they were quite hostile towards us, for taking the job from one of their women.

SD: So that's where the tension came from?

BS: Yes.

SD: Did it work the other way, too? Were some of the white women . . . ?

BS: Well, so few of them, well of course, some women would say that, pass~~some~~ kind of dirty names, ^{like} "all those natives, or something, like that, you know.

SD: Was the union able to deal with that? Like, did they get involved at all and try to . . . ?

BS: No, the~~union~~ was never involved. The supervisor was sort of involved there when things got a little bit high on the grading table, or something like that, when the fish began to fling one way or another, cause it felt that one wasn't pulling enough fish and the other one is sluffing, you know the deal that usually goes with working forces. But

BS: (cont) the union was never with the women, they was never involved. And that cannery, of course, it took in Chinese, there were a lot of Chinese men there, too.

SD: So was there a hierarchy at all in terms of the way management would deal with workers in terms of putting different races in different jobs? I know that in some . . .

BS: Well, of course, the Chinese they were slated, they had their work and it was mostly that they were emptying out boats and they were running the iron chinks and they were really overworked. There that ^{one} time then at 10 o'clock those Chinamen they began to clean out their machines and that was it, ^{the Chinese} they were talking away but not a thing moved that night. (laughs) They were just plain overworked. We worked tremendously long hours, sometimes 14 hours at a straight. And then, of course, the clause came in that women couldn't, that they have to have the eight or ten hour rest period. Well sometimes it just couldn't be done because of the fish that we had to give in a little on the, say a load of fish and if it wasn't done it would spoil so there was a little bit of leeway, but mostly then we got the ten hour rest period. But the men, like Uno, now, he was overworked on a tally dock till they just about dropped that one summer.

US: ^{There was} lot of the times that we couldn't get any sleep at all. We were just down there all the time, And the

US: (cont) worst of it was that when we were in the, like, ^{we} would be on overtime rate during the night, and then at 8 o'clock, we hadn't slept at all yet, and we just went and had our breakfast and then went back to work and it was on straight time from then on again until 5 o'clock that evening, and that was kind of screwy.

BS: But one of the most bitter memories, if you call it bitter memory, was that I worked as washing fish, and then, say for 10 o'clock they needed the sandwiches so I helped the supervisor to make sandwiches. ^{at ten} then I worked in the mess house to work the cook out. Well, then at three o'clock I'd help with the sandwiches down there and then about five o'clock go down to the mess house and after you get through with the mess house well, then, go back to the cannery and wash fish and then help some more sandwiches, and if it was a long day 12 o'clock, well, you had to make more sandwiches. At one time we made fifty-two double loaves of sandwiches for the crews down there. Well, then, when it came payday, well, figured that overtime was in force then, I figured I'd get a fair pay, and my pay was cut because the head office said that the women is earning too much money and there was no way that I could fight to get what was coming, so then I dropped some of those extra jobs.

SD: Oh my. So in other words they didn't want to raise women's

SD: (cont) at all or even accept the level they were at.

BS: Well, they had the wages but see the trouble was that they worked us so many long hours and being time and a half and sometimes double time that I can't remember ^{exactly} what my wage for the two weeks would be. And that was more than some of the men would be making. And the order came, according to the bookkeeper, from the head office, and said that, "It cannot be paid," and the way that the bookkeeper said it, that "No woman is worth that much money," and that is the thing that hurt the most. I had worked for it, and I was not told anything before, and I dropped, I didn't do what I did till then. You went up there just for a period of time and figured that, well, if you can take it and if you can slug it, and you get that little extra money well, you're a little bit ahead. But then to be slapped like that.

SD: Right. That's pretty terrible. Were you in the process of unionizing then?

BS: It was all unionized.

SD: And were part-time workers and temporary workers in the union as well as full-time workers?

BS: Well, they too were that way that they, it was up to them to apply for membership and become a full-fledged member, or then just work, but they paid the union dues, that there were some that were not members, most of them were union

BS: (cont) members.

US: Checkoff.

BS: Checkoff, yeah.

SD: And were the native people there members of the Fishermens Union or were they in the Brotherhood?

BS: In the union.

SD: Right.

US: A lot of them were naturally members of the Native Brotherhood also.

SD: Right, because they would have dual membership.

US: Yep.

SD: That's really a terrible story.

BS: Yes, the first coop that was formed here was just the little, we, garage, you know, no more than 10 by 10, and at that time they used to buy the food by bulk and then distribute that to their members and it was just strictly to their members. ^{Side II:} And then from that they expanded and got a bigger place and then formed a coop. Well, that coop was in existence until we, that was during the war years, and they used to pick up the eggs from the farmers and deliver the feed to the chicken farmers and all this. Well, then everything went along fairly well, and then of course, we'd always been unfortunate in getting a manager that mismanaged a little bit and then there

END OF
TAPE
SIDE ONE

BS: (cont) was a break between the memberships, you know, there was a breakaway. And so the other side then went and formed a coop exchange, and that was the one where Uno was managing it for some time and I clerked for a year and a half there. And - but, before that then they had a water coop along Two hundred and Fifty-Sixth street, that supplied the water for that road, because during those years we didn't have the city water as we have now. The wells were pretty well dry in summertime, so these people formed a coop to bring water to these houses all along 256th street South, down there. Then they had a chicken hatchery where they hatched the chicks for the farmers, and that went along till there were no more chickens to be raised. And then from the time of that time well then they branched into dairy, and most of the Finnish farmers and others too they had three or four cows and out of these three or four cows they were enough able to produce enough milk to sell that more or less kept them in groceries for the month and brought them a little extra. Well then of course the great big dairies came along and all the big demands for these stainless steel cool tanks and waterfounts and everything else which, cement floors for the barns and all the so-called sanitary regulations that were brought in and that killed off, then all the little dairy farmers.

SD: And all the small farmers. Was that a general trend in the area, people moving from having small, almost subsistence farms, I guess you'd say, and then they'd go out and work during the working season.

BS: Yes, yeah. And all these others they were run by the women when the men were out working.

SD: Oh, yeah. The coöps as well, were they?

BS: Well, the coöps of course had the manager and then the people used to buy their, farmers would buy their chicken feed and their cow feed and the feed from the coop besides their groceries and their hardware and whatever was required.

SD: Right.

US: Then there was Farmers League [] the Farmers Union was branching out, too.

BS: Oh, that was, yes, before too, that was the Farmers Union was here too.

US: That involved quite a few of these farmers here.

SD: Right. And what would that do? What would the Farmers Union do?

US: They were getting grain from the Prairies, you know, like, and then they were distributing, like selling it that way they were getting it a little cheaper.

BS: Boxloads of grain.

SD: Did you have a farm?

BS: No, no. One time we had two cows but that is all, just for

BS: (cont) our own. We never been farmers at heart.

US: One time we had half an acre in raspberries, right where the house is now.

BS: Yeah, but that wasn't very successful, either. That area would get the early frost and the late frost and Mission and those places, these were shipping berries two weeks before us, and then we had all kinds of berries left and Mission was finished so the field man didn't come to pick up our raspberries so we couldn't sell them.

SD: Oh, no.

US: And the berry co-op, yeah, we were . . .

BS: A member of the berry coop at Mission, yes.

SD: So that sounds like how people dealt with not having a lot of hard currency was to work cooperatively around all the things that they'd produce.

BS: Yeah, yeah.

SD: So did different coops trade stuff that they produced?

US: No, no.

BS: No, no.

SD: No, they sold. Right. Another question I had was, you had mentioned before that one of the reasons you worked was to pay the taxes on the house. And you saw mostly your working as a way of supplementing the family income . . .

BS: Well as I said, yes.

SD: And was that true of a lot of the women in the neighborhood?

BS: Yes, I think so.

SD: Right. One of the things Mrs. Person and I were talking about was the whole impact of the war on a community where there were a lot of Japanese people.

BS: Oh, yes, this area was quite heavily populated by the Japanese. And they had those tremendous strawberry fields and raspberries and asparagus fields and all these type of vegetables, rhubarb and what they grew, you see. Well, then of course when the war came along they were just forced out of their farms and they were taken into the compound at the exhibition grounds in Vancouver and from there they were -- I think most of the Maple Ridge people were sent down to Lillooet. And that area. And well, they were driven away from the coast, and not too many of them have come back into Maple Ridge, so's there not too many Japanese here at all anymore.

SD: What kind of impact did that have on the community?

BS: Well, of course, with the Finnish people, and the ones with any kind of political knowledge, well, they felt that well, now it's the Japanese, what nationality will be next?

SD: Oh, I see.

BS: And we felt that it was very wrong of them to ship them out and just tear them out and confiscate their boats and the same way with the farms, they got next to nothing for them, and they'd do that to the Japanese, they could do that to

BS: (cont) any other nation, nationality.

SD: So people actually tried to defend them and stop them?

BS: Yes.

SD: That's interesting. And were people, did the Japanese community here, did people within it take one side or another around the war, at all, or . . . ?

BS: You mean the Japanese?

SD: Yeah. Was there much activity in support of the acts that sort of warned people?

BS: Well, see, this is something, and then again the Japanese around here they were very close knit. And we didn't have anything to do with their home life or their social life, or anything like that, so really we don't know what their inner thinkings were, whether they were for or against.

SD: Right. This is another non-related question. Which is, you had children part of the time when you were working, was that an issue women talked about a lot, childcare, what to do with their kids while they were working?

BS: No.

SD: Did people mostly leave their kids with babysitters?

BS: Yeah, babysitters or grandmothers or whoever . . . they couldn't even afford a babysitter because the wages were so small, and like ourselves, now, ours were that big already that I was able to leave them home. See they were in school, and then when they came home that

BS: (cont) I would be home after 5 o'clock or so. Now what impact it had on the upbringing I don't know. At that time it wasn't discussed as much as it is today, you know. What kind of a mark it leaves on the children.

US: But we had a babysitter that time that you were working at the mill.

BS: At the mill, yes, that time I had a babysitter, because they were that much smaller, '32, and ~~Melvin~~ was born, no, not '32, '42-- and Melvin was born '39 so he was only three years old. But that was a bad experience.

SD: Having a babysitter. Yeah, because that seems to me to have been one of the big problems that women faced then. There was no childcare.

BS: There was no childcare, no, no.

SD: And long hours. Okay.

END OF TAPE