

Narrator: Peter Barr (PB)

Company Affiliations: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool (SWP)

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Summary: Former purchasing agent for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Peter Barr describes his career in Thunder Bay's grain industry for the Wheat Pool's office. He discusses how he became the purchasing agent, his major responsibility of working with suppliers to source materials and equipment for the elevators, and what a typical day looked like. He describes how his predecessors showed favouritism to certain suppliers—sometimes due to bribes—but he switched the operation to purchasing from the best quotes. He recounts where the Wheat Pool's Thunder Bay offices were, which elevators operated during his career, and the period of office technological advancement to improve work conditions and communication. Barr explains the need to frequently replace metal equipment in the elevators, the improved efficiencies of the elevator operation over his career, and the introduction of automatic equipment. He recalls the office moving right to the Pool 7 Elevator grounds and the privatization of the company near the end of his career. Other topics discussed include meeting Wheat Pool executives and farmers, his pride in improving the integrity of the purchasing department, stories of suppliers trying to bribe him into contracts, and stories of memorable purchases.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, Peter, it is a pleasure to have you here this afternoon and to participate in the Voices of the Grain Trade project. Perhaps. We can start by my asking you to give your name and then to describe how you came to work in the grain industry. It may take a little while to get to that actually, but let's get started.

PB: Okay. My name is Peter Barr. I worked for Sask Wheat Pool for 18 years. I started there in the late '70s. I applied for the job through the *News Chronicle*. I was living in southern Ontario, and I wanted to come back to Thunder Bay or Port Arthur. I did not think I would get the job, because I did not know anybody. In the grain business, you have to know somebody. But anyway, I applied for the job, and I got a phone call and talked to the person in charge in that department, and he said come on up for an interview. So I got on an airplane and flew up. It was Easter weekend, and my wife came with me, and we visited family while we were here. But anyways, I went for this interview, and he had somewhere in the neighbourhood of 20 pages of foolscap with questions on it. It took four and a half hours to do the interview, and I thought, "I will never get through this." But anyways, I got through it, and we talked and talked. He asked me a lot of questions that I had never been asked before. I have had lots of interviews but was never asked these questions. So I thought, "Oh well, if that is what he wants. That's what I'll tell him."

Keith Brodeur is the man who interviewed me. He was an engineer with the company. He was interested that I did not know anybody because there had been so much foolishness down in this job—in the purchasing job—too many friends and too many things that were going on that he said, "You don't know anybody?" I said, "I know one fellow," and I wouldn't mention his name because he was a real character. I thought that would really screw me up. So anyways, long story short, he made me an offer. He phoned me back about a week later and offered me the job. We discussed it some more. So I gave notice in Orangeville, and four weeks later, I was on the way back to Port Arthur.

I had to wait. I had to leave Eleanor and our two boys there because they were still in school. Anyways I came back up by myself, and I lived at the Prince Arthur for eight or nine weeks. The company, they understood that. They paid all my expenses at the Prince Arthur. There was no problem. Sask Pool at that time was a great company to work for.

EE: Well, maybe before we proceed with that, let's go back with a couple of questions. So you started to work there in about April or May?

PB: It was in April 1979.

EE: In 1979. So 18 years that takes it to 1997. So you worked through the 80's and most of the 90's.

PB: Yes.

EE: You made a reference to family and friends up here as well. You were born in Port Arthur?

PB: I grew up here.

EE: You grew up in the Lakehead, and so there were people you knew here—your church, St. Paul's United, I suppose?

PB: Yes.

EE: So you knew people through there.

PB: I knew people through that. I knew people I grew up with, kids I went to school with. So it was just like nothing. It surprised me that the two and a half years that I was away, how things had changed. Some of my friends had moved away or died or something. You don't realize these things happen in such a short time.

EE: No, that is surprising. Could you sketch very quickly what you had done from the time you finished high school and developed your preparatory to working for Sask Pool?

PB: I worked in supplies. I worked in purchasing. I worked in sales. I worked for Abitibi Woodlands for seven years in the office and in the supply department. I sold for a number of years, different things.

EE: What manufacturer reps--?

PB: Yes, and local reps, too. I travelled from here to White River every three weeks.

EE: Was it to bush camps?

PB: Well to garages, bush camps, everything. I sold automotive parts.

EE: Oh, yes.

PB: But I was always in some kind of a supply end of it. So I worked at the General Hospital. I was the head storekeeper there. Then I was the purchasing agent in a hospital in Orangeville.

EP: And that is what took you down there. You applied for a job.

PB: Yes. I could not wait here for the purchasing agent here to leave, so I had to leave. [Laughs] Then when I came back, I was here for about six months and he retired. Art Hartvickson phoned me up and said, "Are you interested in coming back?" By then I had been with Sask Pools for six months. They had treated me so well. They had moved me back. They were a good company. I said, "No, Art, that would not be fair to be them." So I stayed with Sask Pool.

EE: When you worked there, you were on the brink of expanding on what the company was like and now you are saying something about that?

PB: In those days—it changed while I was there a number of 10 or 12 years later—we had a shakeup and new people in there, but when I went there, they were an excellent company. They were fair. They were honest. In fact, I was instructed that we do not want to put any supplier out of business, go so hard that somebody was going to lose money on something.

I will give you one example. I put a quote out. We were getting something made. I bought a lot of steel in those days. We bought tonnes of steel. Every fall, I would buy 30 to 40 tonnes of steel. And I knew the price of steel, and this guy quoted this job and did not have enough money in it to pay for the steel let alone the work and the painting and what had to be done. So I phoned him up. He was a good supplier. I phoned him and said, "Bob, are you sure your price is right?" "Oh yes. I will check it." He phoned me back and said, "Oh, that is the price." "Well," I said, "You have got the order buddy." I said, "I think you are wrong, but you got the order." And he said, "No, no. I am right." "Okay that's fine." So he supplied it, and two or three weeks later he is in my office and said, "Oh, I should have listened to you," he said." And I said, "Why?" He said, "I didn't even cover my materials."

And I had the authority then that I could change things. I said, "Okay, Bob, what is your cost on this?" He told me, and I said, "What's your mark up usually?" And he told me, and I said, "Okay, I will change the order. I am only going to do this once. I will change the order and give you what you should have got." And he was still lower than everybody else. But that is the way the company was in those days. They were fair to people and to employees. I thought they were very fair. But anyways I started off--.

EE: Well, let's just explore that a little bit further. The Sask Pool was still, in the late 70's, very definitely the cooperative, the Pool, the farmers of Saskatchewan pooling together.

PB: That's right.

EP: And apparently then the policies that they had established in purchasing, as far as you were concerned, but for the company generally in the way that they treated employees and so on, the fairness was fundamental.

PB: You put out quotes. You didn't necessarily take the lowest quote because you wanted quality service. There were so many things involved in it. We knew all of our suppliers. We knew them all very well. We had one particular contractor—he bid low on everything—he, as we called it, he two-bid us to death later. He would have all these extras, where the other contractors, they would give you a quote. That would be it. The end of the job, that was what you got. That was the price, unless he came back with something we had done wrong. If we had made a mistake, then we paid for it, but if he made a mistake, it was his problem. That was the policy and it worked well. But anyways, this guy he was very, very, very happy that I told him, "I am only going to do this once. Don't set me up again because--."

EE: Did you bet he would for not having the pencil sharpened?

PB: No, he said he didn't know what happened. He did most of it himself. He just said, "I don't know what I was thinking that day. When you called me, I should have known something was up." He was 55 percent more than everybody else or something. You know, I mean, they all come in pretty close, because they know the business. They know all the man hours it takes. They do it by measurements of steel. If you have so many tonnes of steel, it is going to take this many men, this length of time to construct it or what.

EE: The experienced suppliers that you want to use have learned all of that over the years.

PB: Oh, they had it right down to the nickel.

EE: Did you find during the first period of time that you worked, that there were changes in the suppliers?

PB: Oh yes.

EE: Do you want to comment on what was going on or what happened?

PB: There was a lot of favouritism. That is why he hired me because I didn't know anybody in that particular business. There were a lot of things that went on that you couldn't prove, but it sure looked awful, awful bad. I know that predecessors received enormous gifts and not just in my job, but in the whole company. There was a lot of, I'd call it, skulduggery.

EE: There are other words for it as well, but that will cover it.

PB: But that's close to say it to be nice. I do remember that after I was there about six months, I had a salesman come to see me and he said, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Sure come on in." He came in and he closed the door. And I figured, "Now what is this guy up to?" A very nice man and he said to me, "What did we start doing right?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "We have had more business from here in the last six months than we have had in the last 10 years." He had excellent service. His products were good. His prices were excellent. He was being by-passed by the predecessors because as I think there was something going on, because I went out for quotes on everything.

EE: Sure. Maybe he hadn't been offering what others were offering, then frozen out for that reason.

PB: Well, it was, what do you call it, perks. That is a good word. There was a lot of perks going on, and I didn't have any perks.

EE: Did you have any sense that management at the head office in Regina had come to realize this, and they were involved in cleaning house here or was it fortuitous that you came in and that you were hired?

PB: The man that hired me came from Regina, and he replaced a man who had passed away who was an engineer. But he was sharp. He did not miss anything. He knew things were going on, but it was tough to put a stop to it. So I was the stopper.

EE: Did you get a sense that in other areas of the local organization that others were gradually hired? I guess they didn't necessarily fire a lot of people, but some would die. There's a chance to improve the level.

PB: They did. The level came up quite a bit! [Laughs] I had to change some contracts. They were just terrible, just unbelievable what they would do. The vendors would come in and get away with these things! I just couldn't believe it. And I had some people mad at me. Of course, you get that. That's the job, eh?

EE: Well, it's inevitable if you are going to clean house in this way. If people have got sweetheart deals in return for giving the guy-in-charge whatever they gave him.

PB: Whatever they wanted.

EE: Yeah. Then of course, the company really needs the contracts re-established on a better basis.

PB: I told salesmen to get out of my office. They would come in and--.

EE: Make offers?

PB: Oh, I've been offered everything. But it is interesting to have salesmen call you. I have seen every con game, every line thing. They'd do anything to get a sale.

EE: You'd been a salesman?

PB: I have been a salesman.

EE: So, you understood.

PB: Don't kid a kidder, because I have been there, buddy. I know.

EE: Were you able to make a living without too much of the way of perks?

PB: No, we never did get perks. The companies I worked for, there wasn't any.

EE: No.

PB: They didn't even give out a bottle of booze at Christmas, which was fine with me. I didn't want it. I didn't want to get involved.

EE: That's really clean, if there is not even a bottle of booze at Christmas because I imagine a lot of whiskey is moved in December.

PB: Oh, I have seen cases of it, cases and cases of it. I know it is going off this story a bit, but I know another purchasing agent who worked for a big company—not as big as ours—but he told the salesman, it was getting close to Christmas, and he said to the salesman, “Nice assortment of liqueurs would be nice.” You know liqueurs are very expensive—an assortment, yet! And the salesman told me—he was a friend of mine—and he said, “Do you know what he asked me for?” I said, “I have no idea.” He said, “An assortment of liqueurs.” I said, “Are they going to get it?” He said, “I gave it to my boss, and he can do whatever he wants.”

EE: Sure, whatever he wants.

PB: But the thing is, somebody has to pay for these things. That's the way I looked at it.

EE: In your case, the farmers of Sask would ultimately pay for it.

PB: That's right, and they were good to me. It was good company. I just couldn't see myself doing anything.

EE: Did you go to Regina at any time?

PB: Oh yes, numerous trips to Regina. I took courses out there. It was kind of interesting to go out there. And then some of the board members would come down here every fall. We would have an awards night where the 25-year guys get their pins. The retirees all came. So I met a lot of--. In fact, I chauffeured a lot of board members around.

EE: To the airport?

PB: Oh yeah.

EE: Or did they come in by train?

PB: No, they flew in most of them. I remember one day I was really busy, and the board members were there, and this guy comes in and says, "What do you do here?" And I said, "I am the purchasing agent." And he said, "Oh I see. You are the guy who spends my money." And I said, "Oh no, I am the guy who saves you money." And I stood right up to him. Every time he came from then on, he came to visit me. The nicest guy you would ever want to meet. But he came in here and I guess he thought I'm going to show this, they use to call us Easterners. [Laughs] But it was an interesting time. I really enjoyed meeting the people, meeting the reps from different companies, and working with the people in the elevators. I mean, I had 200 millwrights to look after and 85 electricians. Everything they wanted, I got for them.

EE: You weren't actually in charge of, and responsible for, the work that they did, or were you?

PB: No, I wasn't responsible for what they did. I was responsible for what they needed.

EE: Sure.

PB: And the head electrician would send me an order and a requisition, and I in turn had to fill it.

EE: Right.

PB: But after a while, like on the electrical side, I put out a contract to all the local electrical firms. We knew what we needed. We knew what we had. I had lists of everything we used. I would send it out and say, "Quote me this." And they in turn would, and it would go for a year, maybe two years, and then I would quote again on it.

EE: Back to the market.

PB: And each head electrician had a book with everything that we used. So he would just go down the page and BX wire, or whatever he wanted, and it simplified things because they guaranteed that price for that year. And their suppliers guaranteed them that price for that year. But it was fairly lucrative contact because when you get 85 electricians to look after, they go through a lot of fiddly things and big things.

EE: The Sask Pool would rate pretty high amongst the companies in this city. Not as large, I guess, as the paper mills, or was Sask Pool actually in competition with Great Lakes, I guess, at the time?

PB: Great Lakes.

EE: Great Lakes would be the biggest company in town?

PB: It's like in the Hydro. Great Lakes got their hydro from Ontario Hydro. And we bought our hydro from Thunder Bay Hydro. So we were a big user of Thunder Bay Hydro.

EE: You may well have been the biggest customer for Thunder Bay Hydro.

PB: We were the biggest.

EE: Partly a consequence of the fact that--. How many elevators were you operating?

PB: Seven.

EE: Seven at that time, and of course they are spotted along the waterfront, and it is not really to run one huge power line into the Great Lakes.

PB: No, everyone gets one power line.

EE: Yes.

PB: But you know when we were making pellets, our electrical bill for a month would be \$400,000 for one terminal. But these pellet machines were electrically driven. We were selling pellets to Europe in those days. We just sent boatloads of them over there. Tonnes and tonnes and tonnes of it, and this were all good money because all you were taking were the screenings.

EE: Yes, and mixing them with--?

PB: Well, we use to mix them with steam to make them stick together.

EE: Oh, the screenings steamed up but it turned into pellets.

PB: Well, they were pulverized.

EE: Yes.

PB: And the protein in our pellets was exceptional, because of what was in them. Then I know that they would send boatloads to France, and France would unload them all. They would even vacuum the boat out.

EE: To get every single bit.

PB: To get every single bit, and then they would pulverize ours and mix their stuff in within because their protein was so low but they could make it go further if they put theirs in with ours, but tonnes of it.

EE: Among the staff there are policies of adulterations. The animals don't know any better. [Laughs]

PB: No, they didn't know if they were Canadian or if they were French. They didn't know.

OM: They did that with Algerian wine as well. [Laughs]

PB: But it was a great success.

EE: The screening, this is basically weed seeds. I guess weed seeds are said to be nutritious too?

PB: It works for the cows. But it was our biggest money maker.

EE: You were not involved with the selling of it.

PB: I just bought supplies. I didn't buy any grain because the 75,000 farmers, they sent the grain.

EE: Right. How large was the office here in Thunder Bay for Sask Pool? How many people worked there, let's say the staff that you had?

PB: I worked out of the engineering office on the corner of Waterford and Dunlop Street. It used to be the Clayton Building. That is across where UPS is now. There is a long building there now.

EE: I will have to check the map to focus my own mind, but in any case, you were in that building. How many people worked there?

PB: There were 17 people in there.

EE: 17.

PB: Yeah, but they were engineers, technologists, and office workers too.

EE: Sure, there would have to be the staff.

OM: It is probably the YES office.

EE: Yes.

EE: UPS, that UPS on Memorial Avenue, just around the corner there.

PB: Yes, we were right across the road there. [Laughs]

EE: Oh, Owen and I know this building pretty well. He knows it much better than I do. I see, so that is where you were working.

PB: Where the electrical company, there is a building next to it, that was a yard for us. The next building was our warehouse. I had all my stock in that warehouse. I had two trucks on the road.

EE: Picking up and delivering?

PB: Yes, picking up and delivering. One man did the mail. This is before faxes. His job was at 5:00 every morning he made a round of all the elevators and picked up the shipping orders from the day before. They had to have them in the office by 8:00 in the morning so that they could phone Regina and give them the figures so that they could charge the grain out. Then he would make another round that morning. He finished at noon, just after lunch.

EE: And Saskatchewan in those days would be an hour behind.

PB: At least an hour.

EE: Yes.

PB: So if they got it at 8:00, they would get it in Regina when they opened. And it was so important because when you are shipping tonnes and tonnes of grain, one-day difference makes a lot of money difference. If you only sent it once a week, you would lose money on it from billing it out.

EE: Onto the ships?

PB: Onto the ships.

EE: Oh yes, I can certainly see that because I was just wondering about the movement of grain from the Prairies. That was all in the hands of the Wheat Board.

PB: CNR [Canadian National Railway], CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway].

EE: The Grain Commission and the railways of course.

PB: The railway, of course.

EE: Bringing it in, but to you were the decisions--. So these were the orders from the shipping companies, the vessels here, what was wanted.

PB: Yes, the vessels here.

EE: And that had to be authorized out of Regina then?

PB: They billed it through Regina. And when you get a 700-foot ship and it has got a 29-foot draft on it, you put a lot of grain in it.

EE: Yes, you certainly do.

PB: They would ship for hours.

EE: It would be loading a ship, yes?

PB: They have to move the spouts to get the weight even.

EE: Were there other offices that Sask Pool had?

PB: They had the eighth floor of the Public Utilities Building.

EE: Here in Port Arthur?

PB: In Port Arthur. And we had the whole eighth floor that where all the--.

EE: That is where the managers [inaudible].

PB: The managers and accounting and payroll people and personnel, they were all up there, which is fine with me. They could stay up there. [Laughs]

EE: Yes, I suppose it's half the city between the two offices, just about the right distance?

PB: Right. They were on the phone quite often. But they were still an arm's length away.

EE: Of course, as long as you are doing your job right, that's just about the right distance.

PB: Well, I had two mailings a day to the office and vice versa, so everything I did they got right away. Of course, all the invoices would come down, and I might have to approve the invoices. But I had a system there that if the invoice matched the purchase order, I didn't have to see it again. If there were any discrepancies, it came back to me. Then I would correct it from there.

EE: Well, it is part of trusting the people in the organization, too. If you are any good at all, they should be able to follow through.

PB: Oh, I had great people. Our accounts payable people were just great. They were on the ball.

EE: Up on the eighth floor of the Whalen Building, yes?

PB: Yes.

EE: You were referring to communications in two or three connections, when did the fax machine come in at Sask Pool?

PB: Well, I am trying to remember the year, Ernie. Anyways fax machines were just out.

EE: It was of the 80s. I date some of these myself.

PB: It was in the 80s.

EE: When we were doing the *Vast and Magnificent Land* project, which you know about pretty well from Eleanor's involvement with it, the ministry had a fax machine which was quite a novel—the Ministry of Northern Affairs. It seems to me it was in 1987

that fax machines became readily available, and Western Union almost lost half of its business. Its ticker tape was phased out very largely.

PB: We had a telex machine up in the main office.

EE: Yes.

PB: But it wasn't that good. We found that it made mistakes. If you were sending part numbers out, you would get the wrong part. You would say, "This is wrong." They would say, "Oh no, this is what your machines said." Anyways when it would come time for fax machines, I read up about it and talked to people about it. So I had to send a request to Regina because this was something else. I think I bought seven fax machines. I am sure it was seven.

EE: I am guessing it was just before 1987 that you were doing that.

PB: I think I requested something in the neighbourhood of \$25,000.

EE: They were fairly expensive.

PB: They were expensive in those days. They weren't that good.

EE: No.

PB: Now for the \$100 or \$150, you could get an excellent machine.

EE: Yes.

PB: And I had to say why I needed them.

EE: It was a new technology!

PB: But the people in Regina, they were great, you know. So I sent it, send it back, approved. So I went and shopped around for fax machines and bought one, put one in each elevator. I think we only had five elevators running in those days, because there was one in my office, one in the main office. So if I bought seven, there were five elevators running.

EE: The great advantage of that was that you could lay a facsimile of your order on a supplier's desk.

PB: Right.

EE: The numbers were there to be read as you were approving them.

PB: The thing I liked about it was quotes came back right away. When I first started, you send out a quote. You mailed it out. They got it a day or two later. Then they would send it back a day or two later. It was a week before you got your quotes back. Then when the fax machines I got it back most times the same day. It simplified everything. [Laughs]

EE: It speeded things up.

PB: It speeded things up. They were great. I used it a lot. But we still sent a hard order out in the mail.

EE: A hard copy?

PB: [Inaudible] a hard copy in the mail.

EE: That tended to fall away. In various contexts, people were content with the fax these days.

PB: In those days, that fax paper wasn't very good.

EE: I am running a Sharp UX 256 that I think I bought in 1994. It is still serving very well, answering machines and all the rest of it. But it does have that old paper, that rolled paper. You end up having to photocopy if you want to keep it, because it fades.

PB: We found later, going back through files that faded all off your fax.

EE: Yes, it has forced you into having a photocopy as well. Computerization, did it come into your office at some point?

PB: Oh yeah.

EE: And of course, into the elevators. You were involved with purchasing those as well?

PB: I found that before the computer, copy machines, we did not have a copy machine in any elevator. They would write what they call shunt slips. For each car they push in, you have to make this slip out, and you had to have seven copies. So the guy would sit there and put carbon paper in. He'd only do three or four at a time, and then--.

EE: You couldn't press through.

PB: The last one was--.

EE: Illegible, like the old fax.

PB: Right. And then he'd take that out and he'd do another one. I was down at the elevator one day, and I looked at that and I said, "What are you doing?" And he said, "I am doing my shunts." I said, "Oh." I said, "You make seven copies." Anyways, I talked to some people, and I said, "I think we should have copy machines down there." "Oh, oh," they said, "we will never get those." I said, "Well--."

EE: You are talking to the person who might get you one.

PB: I said, well, I am not going to ask for five of them because we had them in our office. We had them up in the main office. But I will work it one at a time. I got copy machines in every elevator.

EE: Starting with the biggest elevator.

PB: The biggest elevator first, of course. This guy with the seven shunt slips, he thought he had died and went to heaven.

EE: If he did one, he could just flopped it down.

PB: Drop it down, seven copies. So it took a long time to bring things around. You wouldn't believe what I saw down there. When I first went there, they were still doing things from the '30s. I just shook my head. This was a million-dollar business, and here we are doing things that--. I remember I got a phone call from a foreman one day, and he said, "I have been here 19 years." He said, "And that is the first time I ever got a full-length pencil." He sent me a note. We kept the stationary supplies in the office, and he sent me a note and he said, "I need some pencils." So I took the box of six dozen pencils, and put his name on it, and threw it in the mailbag. He phoned me and said, "That is the first time I ever got a full-length pencil." Because they use to take the full-

length pencils up to the main office, and when the girls got them down to a three-inch stub, they would have to save them. This guy was running the office, and you wouldn't get a new pencil till you brought your stub in. I couldn't understand it.

EE: Because Sask Pool dates from him early '20s, but you were just saying the '30s, do you think the Depression determined the business culture for Sask Pool for the next 40 years?

PB: Yes, it did.

EE: From the '30s to the '80s?

PB: Yes, and I said, "What did you get before?" He said, "Oh, we would get half a dozen stubs." I just laughed. I said, "Well I don't send stub pencils. I don't even keep stub pencils."

One of the electricians was telling me that if you were going down to do a job, and you are going to tape something, you'd go to the head electrician and say, "I need some electrician's tape." He'd say, "Well give me your pencil." And he would wrap half a dozen around the pencil, and that is what the guy went down to do the job with. I couldn't believe it. I said, "It is not that expensive. Give him a roll." But they were giving them out by then. But this is what they did, only two or three years before that, you see. The head electrician would wrap so many turns around the guy's pencil. Yet there were other things that were--.

EE: Would you say the contrast between a purchasing department that probably costs the farmers money on deals that were made, and then the saving money on pencils and tape, it's a sorry commentary on the company?

PB: Yes, it was sad. It was a great time to be there to see these things happening.

EE: Because it was changing?

PB: Because it was change, eh?

EE: For the better.

PB: Yeah, and of course, I had worked for places where we had lots of office supplies. We had up-to-date equipment.

EE: You had not talked about computers yet, because of that of course can be real fun. [Laughs]

PB: Then we came into computers. The engineer in our office was the first one to get a computer.

EE: He had moved up from this big, heavy calculator to the real thing.

PB: Well, they had a slide thing.

EE: Oh, the slide rule.

PB: Oh, yes. It was pretty mickey mouse, eh?

EE: I'd use a slide rule in my day just for simple calculations.

PB: He'd use it for everything.

EE: It should be part of one's life! Of course, he would have a more elaborate one for all sorts of things. But he'd also, I expect, there were calculators that he would be moving to as well. Would he?

PB: Yeah, yeah.

EE: So what did you get in the way of computers?

PB: I'm trying to remember what we bought. We bought a number of different computers because we didn't know too much about them.

EE: No.

PB: We bought different types. They would try them, and the main office got them. Then they would try it and different ones.

EE: The eighth floor of the Whalen got one, because I presume that Sask Pool would have acquired a big mainframe at some point at company headquarters, or not? In Regina?

PB: Oh, Regina had them. They were into it, but not that soon. They waited a long time before they got into it, before the payroll was on. You could tell the payroll forms were all computerized, became computerized.

EE: We were talking—our very first interview was with Roy Lamore, who was with CPR rail—and the area where he worked that was assigning the individual cars to the elevators. Computerization, in his memory, was taking place in the early '70s, the beginning of the decade. He quoted the person who was beginning the process there, looking around the room and saying, “Well you know there are, is it, 20 people working there, and it won't be very long that there will be fewer in number.” And Roy said, well, he didn't really understand how that could be, but this fellow knew what he was talking about. They were down to like a handful or fewer in just a few years because of course computers made such enormous difference.

PB: But we had a learning curve. I took courses on it. I wasn't very good at it. I took the course. I went for a week, and when I went back my computer was gone. The one up on the scale floor had calved out, so they came down and took my computer and put it up there. About nine months later, they came back and gave me a computer, and I said, “I don't know what to do with it now. I know how to turn it on and that's about all.” And he said, “Well you took the course.” I said, “That's nine months ago. I should have been back here working on it.”

EE: And the worst thing is that through most of your work years, the one's you are sketching, if you were running a PC—and I presume you would have had PC Microsoft programs—it was DOS that was the operating program. I am an Apple user, and of course in the late 80's things were changing radically with the graphical user interface and all of the rest of it. But when is Windows available? Is it 1997 or was it a bit earlier than that when Microsoft goes over to the icons on the screen and all the rest of it, that makes it easier to work, whatever the shortcomings of Windows may be. You were retired in 1997. Nothing easy in these I can well imagine.

PB: Nothing easy.

EE: You would have experiences of the different elevators that Sask Pool had and what they were like. Sask Pool bought some of them and built others—all of course before your time—but did any of that experience of the origin of an elevator or the nature of it lead to these terminals? Was that part of your experience, what they were like?

PB: In what way? Construction?

EE: The basic construction perhaps.

PB: Well, they were all there when I came.

EE: They were all there. Were they all the same basically?

PB: Well yes, basically.

EE: Were their differences among them that were of interest to you? Perhaps in purchasing?

PB: At Current River we had Pool 4A and 4B. They were two separate elevators, I understand, at one time and then they joined them, and it was owned by another company. And then we had Pool 6, which is that picture there.

EE: The one that is gone?

PB: The one that is gone.

EE: Which was very well built when we all saw that when they tried to knock it down.

PB: Oh yeah. The story that electricians use to tell me about Pool 6 when they would try to drill a hole in it, they would just go through drill bits because the aggregate that was in there was so hard that they couldn't drill through it. They would have to keep pounding. They had to use, what is it that they call them?

EE: A hammer or something, compressed air hammer?

PB: Yeah, to drill holes. But the aggregate in there, they said was a red aggregate, and they said it was just millions of years old and just as hard.

EE: I wonder if it was the best built elevator on the waterfront. It would be really ironic if the city decides to knock down the very best built of the elevators.

PB: It had problems, too. It was always wet downstairs. They had sump pumps running steady because you are right on the water really.

EE: Sure. They built it perhaps a bit too low, then? Because it could all have been--?

PB: They put pilings down and put one piling on top of another. They just drove them down.

EE: Looking for bedrock?

PB: Yeah. Now at Pool 4, they can only load a boat to such a depth because it is all shale down there. You can't dredge it out that well with shale. But Pool 7 is all muskeg, and they dredged that one out.

EE: That was the place where you would finish off a ship I suppose because there was lots of draft there.

PB: Right.

EE: So No. 7 in the main group on the Intercity waterfront.

PB: It was 7A and 7B. Then we had the old Ogilvie's over by the CP station. And then we had the one with the old Searle elevator out on the reservation there. But just as I got there, they were just finishing up on the river towards the Great Lakes. There was a number of small elevators there. They knocked them all down. But they bought them all. It increased their quotas, they way I was told.

EE: That was your understanding with the amalgamation, and the Canadian Wheat Board [CWB] would move through Sask Pool Elevators would depend on what their capacity was with the Lakehead?

PB: Well, there would be a quota for the Lakehead.

EE: Yes.

PB: And each one of those little elevators has a quota, so if you buy them up, you get their quota. That is the way I was told anyways.

EE: Yes. Well, I expect that is the truth. It is businesslike.

PB: They were taking them down.

EE: Yes. You were on the way of being very definitely the biggest operator on the waterfront here? No one else would be anywhere close. Manitoba Pool Elevators was far smaller in terms of capacity, and Richardson's.

PB: Richardson's only had one or two, and Manitoba had a couple. P&H [Parrish & Heimbecker] was quite small and Richardson's.

EE: Okay, well we have sort of worked past when you started working, and you worked there, who you worked for, what kind of work that you do. Please describe a typical day. Was there a typical day in your job?

PB: Yes, the first thing that I would do in the morning was sign all the purchase orders from the day before in my mail. Because if I did it at quitting time, I would miss something. First thing in the morning you are right there.

EE: Fresh as could be.

PB: I always went in early, so I could get all of this done before anybody came in. Then my mail would come in around 8:00, and then I would get the requisitions from all the terminals and get to work on those and get stuff sent to the elevator, and plus many phone call and any rushes. There were always rushes. "Oh, this just broke. I need this right away!"

EE: Sure.

PB: Then the whole day was spent usually on the phone purchasing, checking prices, getting quotes. Then I had the warehouse to look after, too, which I had somebody that was with me, but it was my responsibility.

EE: How large was your office actually in terms of people, yourself and an assistant?

PB: Well, I had a junior buyer, and I had a secretary, and then the two trucks.

EE: Very, very small complement for the billions that moved through your office, I am sure, which you would have.

PB: We had a lot of invoices went through for a lot of money.

EE: I can well image.

PB: It's nice spending other people's money. But you have got to be careful, eh? I have 75,000 people looking down my throat. [Laughs]

EE: All those farmers.

PB: All those farmers. But everybody thinks they are a purchasing agent, eh? It's unbelievable. Everybody thinks they can do it. "Oh, I can do it better than that clown can." Well.

EE: Oh really?

PB: Oh yeah!

EE: It's being in the position that has other people saying, "I can do that, too." I don't think I would assert that. I suppose I can learn it, but there is a lot to learn.

PB: Oh yeah. I would have superintendents phone me up. I would send a copy of the purchase order down, and they would read it and say, "Oh, that's far too much to pay for that." One day I had a [inaudible] guy phone me. I ordered six wheelbarrows, and we had specs on wheelbarrows. They had to be the hardwood frame. It had to have a deep tray on it. It had to have a rubber tire that—I am trying to think of the name of it—a rounded rubber tire because if you put a square one on there, as soon as a guy turns it, it tips over.

EE: Yes.

PB: Anyways this clown phones me from one of the elevators, assistant superintendent, and he says, "I have got the Canadian Tire book here, and I can buy a wheel barrow for \$69" I said, "Oh, that's nice." He said, "I've got your order here and you are paying \$120 for them." And I said, "That's right." He said, "Why are you doing that. What kind of a purchasing agent are you?" He was really giving it to me, and finally—I took it for a little while—and I said, "Hey, you don't know what you are talking about." "What do you mean? I know a wheelbarrow from a wheelbarrow." So I told him. I said, "What is the frame on that one?" He had the catalogue there, and he said, "It's a pipe frame." And I said, "They break. You don't want those." I said, "You want a hardwood frame." Then I went on to explain the tires and the trays. Their trays are so deep, and these trays are this deep. Finally, he said, "I guess you are right." I said, "Thanks a lot."

EE: You just wasted half my day.

PB: I just wasted 20 minutes of my time straightening this guy out. But this happens.

EE: Yes, I can understand. In that sense people think they could make a better judgment on something.

PB: Right.

EE: How many suppliers did Sask Pool actually have?

PB: I couldn't tell you.

EE: No, I am sure. It is a crazy question. Were many of them local?

PB: Oh, most of them were local.

EE: Well, that had reps locally.

PB: Or they have manufacturing deals through George Hill, or Bisco, or Cochrane Hardware, or one of these. So you know you get through them.

EE: So you were able mostly to deal with someone here on?

PB: Pretty well, on general supplies

EE: Right.

PB: And then we used wire-rope cable. We used miles of cable, and that is expensive. I would have six or eight wire-rope salesmen call on me. All had the best rope in the world, and most of it was offshore and if you would get some of it, it would be really good, but then the next reel you get as soon as you put some tension on it, and it would snap, you see. It takes a long time.

EE: You were just alluding to the quality of the wire and the cable that you could buy from various places. Consistency of product is that essential. Safety could be involved and that is where the local suppliers would be involved in providing--.

PB: Yes, there was one company here that all they sold was wire-rope cable, and we bought most of it from them. Their quality was excellent. It was a little expensive, but if you don't have downtime, you are making money on it.

EE: Absolutely. Downtime is a factor in incredible expense to have. Would it be a reflection of the way in which Thunder Bay had developed as an industrial place with the terminal elevators and the paper mills, that there were these various suppliers in existence here? You mention George Hill and several other companies that had grown up. There was a living to be made representing manufacturers in this city. Would it be an indication of the one of the things that would be distinctive about this city? I remember was it Jim Armstrong from the movers once telling me in context back in the '80s that you had to come as far west as Thunder Bay out of Toronto to find his company—locally owned moving company. As far as Sault Ste. Marie they were run by offices out of Toronto.

PB: Right.

EE: So this, too, may be a reflection of what was the isolation of Thunder Bay once upon a time, that these representatives developed here. They made a good living doing that presumably.

PB: Well, the big companies didn't want to come in here at one time.

EE: Yes.

PB: But we tried to deal locally if we could, if the price was reasonable.

EE: And the quality was there.

PB: And the quality was there. But service, too, means so much, eh?

EE: Yes.

PB: I mean I had companies that I could phone an order at 9:00 in the morning and be delivered at 1:00 in the afternoon. I mean it was service.

EE: Ones locally stocked a certain amount of common things.

PB: Right. And you know this makes things easier when you are overhauling equipment, that they stock it locally. But we dealt a lot with Northland Machinery and with the Day Company. They built cleaners, grain cleaners. They would have these parts in

stock. In fact, Northland was even making the cylinders. Before they had to go the States to get cylinders made, so they bought the equipment and made them here, which cut the cost down and the delivery.

EE: Sure.

PB: I would buy a hundred cylinders. They're two feet in diameter and 12 feet high. This was a nice order! [Laughs]

EE: It certainly is. What would they be used for?

PB: In the cleaning machines.

EE: In the machines where they were spinning?

PB: Yeah, and there is a cutter, I'm trying to remember how many cylinders to a machine. I can't recall.

EE: Did the cylinders wear out?

PB: Oh yeah. Well, the grain is so hard on equipment.

EE: It's actually sort of corrosive, isn't it?

PB: Well on our spouts we had to reline them every year because if there was a bend in the spout, by the end of the year it would have holes in it from the friction of the grain. That's why I said I used to buy 40 to 50 tonnes of steel every year. And then they came out with a new product that looks like plastic, but it isn't. I am trying to think of the name of it. We used to buy it in sheets. You could cut it and form it and heat it and form it. This would last eight or 10 years on the spout.

EE: As against the steel?

PB: Against the steel. Amazingly!

EE: And there are all kinds of plastics of course, and plastic has the potential to be so far much better than steel. Isn't that astonishing!

PB: It was something that we really cut our costs down.

EE: Of course.

PB: It was expensive to buy, but then you are not replacing it. In the wintertime, we used to keep, I don't know, 100 or 200 grain employees on the millwright gangs to do this work—to replace this spouting. Everything had to be replaced every year.

EE: So there is a good deal of work in the elevators in the wintertime even there is no grain moving into ships?

PB: In those days there was because of the—I am trying to think of the word for it—but the abrasiveness of the grain, and I remember we tried a thing at the Hydro plant. They were burning our screenings for a while. They couldn't believe how their spouts wore out from our grain. They only used it for a short time, but they were flabbergasted that in that short time the abrasiveness.

EE: This is the grain itself? Well, there wouldn't be stones in it or anything of that sort. This is the grain itself.

PB: No, it has been de-stoned. It's been everything.

EE: Yes, it's being cleaned out.

PB: It's the way it went.

EE: I've been a farmer's son. I've shovelled the stuff often enough. You would not think of individual grain kernels or handfuls or shovelfuls of them as being abrasive material. So they clearly are.

PB: There'd be holes in them. But you've got to remember there would be tonnes and tonnes of grain going over that.

EP: Well, yes of course. Millions of tonnes moved through this port through the early into the mid '80s, and then things began to slow down. Let's take a look at a few of these questions. I'll give you a chance to construct things. What would you like people to know about the work you did and the places you worked—stuff that might be an interesting snippet of Peter Barr's testimony?
[Laughs]

PB: That is a tough one, Ernie.

EE: Well would it be simpler to say what might interest or surprise people about the work that you did?

PB: It would surprise people to know how many more vendors I had than the previous people. [Laughs]

EE: Had people become discouraged?

PB: Oh yeah. A lot of people wouldn't even call at the elevators because they knew that so-and-so had it tied up.

EE: So how long did it take for the others to show up? How long did it take for the word to get out?

PB: It doesn't take. I would send quotes out, eh?

EE: Okay.

PB: And they would be down there like a hungry squirrel. They would be right there. [Laughs] And like the guy said, “What did I do right?”

EE: Yes. So do you think that your sending out of quotes, or asking for quote, is what it comes down to it, isn't it—requests for proposals—was it a new thing out of Sask Pools to some extent?

PB: Well, I imagine somebody did it, but I have no idea what it was. Because like I say, this man came down and said, “What did I do right? There were other suppliers.”

EE: It is possible that your predecessors—let's put it in the plural here now—having established a number of favourable relationships, shall we say, didn't bother?

PB: No, they didn't.

EE: No.

PB: And I had other suppliers say, “How come I am not getting all the business now?” You are getting all you can handle, you know. I had one supplier. He was our pest control man. The place was running with--.

EE: Vermin.

PB: Vermin. I talked to the safetyman, and he was unhappy about it, and some of the employees were unhappy about it. Actually, the safetyman found a vendor who was out of Barrie, and he came up here and we talked. The contract was over with the fellow we had. So I got in touch with him and said, "We won't be renewing your contract." He came down to my office. Boy, he said, "What are you doing?" He said. "I played the game." Oh. He said, "I brought the donuts and the coffee and everything down every month." Evidently for years he would come down with a big box of donuts and cans of coffee and cream, cans of cream.

EE: At each of the elevators?

PB: And he was put out a couple of traps. So anyway, we had this man come up from Barrie. We talked to him, and he spent a week here. He went to every elevator and put eight and ten hours in every one of them, you know. And we could see a difference, eh? So I talked to him. For about six months he came up every month. He would drive up to Thunder Bay and spend a week or 10 days. We were not paying him any more than paying the other guy.

EE: He wasn't investing in donuts, of course?

PB: We didn't get any donuts, and I didn't care about donuts.

EE: But you got traps?

PB: He did the job. He got traps. He got rid of pigeons. He didn't shoot them or kill them or anything. He just made it miserable for them that they wouldn't come back. In fact, he did move up here because the other elevators were interested in him. [Laughs] And he worked up here for years. I don't know but I think he is retired now. He came up and established here, and in fact, I drove him around. He was looking for a house and I drove him around a couple of evenings looking for a house. These were things that had gone on for years.

EE: I wonder whether Sask Pool inherited some of these relationships when they bought other elevators, or how these things came to be earlier. Because it must have been slackness somewhere between the farmers' reps born in Regina running things and the local operations?

PB: Well, it was up to the local manager here. He was supposed to see that these things didn't go on. When I started here, I worked for a couple of managers who were just super guys.

EE: Yes. It's the earlier ones you were thinking about?

PB: Yes. They were very, very nice guys.

EE: Recent challengers?

PB: They were very, very good people.

EE: Do you want to compliment one on tape? The good ones?

PB: No, I had better not.

EE: Well, if these are really fine managers of Sask Pool here.

PB: Don Trosh was most of the time I was here.

EE: We had heard his name, and he is sort of in our minds for an interview somewhere along the lines.

PB: He lives out in BC now.

EE: Yes, he would have to be pursued by someone else in our organization.

PB: But he was just a terrific guy. You did your job. He didn't bother you. He never bothered me once. Once in a while he would drop in, "How is it going? Got any problems?" I didn't have any problems that I couldn't handle. He would say, "Well you know where I am." It was a pleasure to have him around, really. And most of the time I was there, he was manager. It worked out really well. I enjoyed him. And you could go and ask for anything. Just a good guy. He was fair. He was strict in his own way.

EE: He's a manager. He has to be--?

PB: A manager, yes, but he was very nice, and he was very straightforward. But a lot of these things, I think, had gone on for years—years and years and years. And they just grew from there.

EE: That is where I wonder whether how Sask Pool's operation at the Lakehead grew. They built some but I think they bought others?

PB: They bought most of them.

EE: And so, I'm guessing that they acquired more than just buildings and structures and that that would be one of the ways in which you would acquire things that you really didn't need as the years passed?

PB: The superintendent looked after most of these things at one time. So he would do what he wanted to do, and if he had friends-. That is why I say I didn't know anybody. That is why I got hired.

EE: Right. And at the time, Lakehead was isolated enough. Two cities jostling each others until 1970, one could imagine a lot of relationships would have developed inevitably?

PB: Oh yeah.

EE: The isolation that existed here.

PB: There is a lot of stories about those. I don't want to go into it. [Laughs]

EE: Things we won't put on tape.

PB: We won't put on tape. [Laughs]

EE: So that would surprise people. I am curious actually in terms of the changes that came in, were you given, did you have numbers, for what purchasing had cost in previous years it amounted to? Were you given overall figures?

PB: I was never given any.

EE: It would be interesting if on the assumption that Viterra now has all the paperwork for various departments if they hung on to them. It would be interesting to tot up the totals between one year and another. Of course, there are such a lot of variables, the amount of grain moving and different amounts of grain wearing on pipes. Was weather a significant factor from year to year?

PB: Well do you mean, western weather?

EE: No, I was thinking of weather here.

PB: Not really. The ships might be slow coming in in the spring or something.

EE: When the breakup might occur?

PB: If you had a bad crop year.

EE: What are you most proud of in the work that you did for Sask Pool through the years, other than cleaning house? [Laughs]

PB: I feel I made good examples for what I did and the way I worked. I got along well with the staff—not just the office staff but the staff in the terminals—because I would try and help them wherever I could.

EE: Sure.

PB: And evidently that wasn't the way before. People didn't talk to somebody. It was stupid. They couldn't believe it when I went there. The people in the same office wouldn't talk to the other guy. Oh! Just infighting and jealousy. A lot of jealousy. When I first started there were two guys in the main office giving me a hard time. I had them both down in my office one day and I said, "Okay guys--."

EE: At the same time?

PB: Yeah. I said, "Okay, what is the beef?" "Well, when so-and-so went on holidays, we always did this job." For a week or two or whatever it was. I said, "Well, I can't help that." I said, "You applied. You didn't get it. I applied and I got it. But if you are not happy, if you don't think you were fairly done," I said, "let's go talk to the man in the next office, because he is the guy that hired me, and maybe we could sort this all out." No, they were not interested. From then on, they became really good guys. They were good guys. They were ticked off because I got the job and you know

EE: Well, confronting them was the thing to do.

PB: Yeah, and both at once.

EE: Yes, yes. [Laughs]

PB: You know, if I am going to hit them, hit them both. [Laughs]

EE: Right.

PB: But we are still friends. I see them and we stop and talk. But at the time they were--.

EE: Sure. Little problems, eh?

PB: Little problems. I like getting little problems out of the road.

EE: Yes.

PB: But as far as the staff in the elevators go, I got along well with all of them. And there were some real characters—funny, funny characters and silly characters. But they were characters. These are the kinds of people you meet.

EE: You mean they did the job?

PB: They did the job. I don't know how some of them did it. [Laughs]

EE: Can you describe a character or two?

PB: When I first went there, I saw them, and I got some slips into the elevators, and I saw this guy's name. I said to Lisa, who was my junior buyer, I said, "Describe this guy to me." She told me. She described him, and I said, "Yeah." I said, "Yeah, I went to Pine Street School with him. He was the dumbest kid in Pine Street School!" He was a foreman at the elevator. I was just amazed because he had no personality. He was a dull-normal—and I am being kind. He was just incompetent, but he was there long enough, and somebody pushed him in. That's what happens in the elevator: People get promoted who shouldn't be.

EE: Some would call this, once upon a time, well, it was named after him, of course, The Peter Principle, promoted to your level of incompetence.

PB: Incompetence.

EE: When you couldn't be moved any higher, that would be obvious. You couldn't even do the job he had.

PB: Yeah. I met other characters down there. I was warned. The last five or six years, I worked at Pool 7. They had closed the office. In fact, they had sold that office. We had moved to the building back of the Keg. No back of--. There's the Keg, and then there was the Robin's Donuts building, and then there was the next building down towards the lake. We had the ground floor in there. Then we moved out of the PUC Building, which was another mistake, but anyways they we moved in there. Then we found out we were paying out \$100,000 a year in rent. I told them, "Give me five years rent, and I will build you a building." Well, you could, at that time!

EE: Who'd made that deal?

PB: The bean counters, the accountants. They wanted everything together.

EE: In Regina?

PB: No, no here.

EE: They wanted to look over your shoulder easily then, I take it.

PB: I don't know what. They never bothered me.

EE: So they left the Whelan Building because it was too expensive?

PB: Well, I think the PUC people wanted the eighth floor because it was the prize of the building. You saw everything.

EE: That is the top floor?

PB: The top floor. And I think they were mentioning about moving them. You see we owned 35 percent of Robin's Donuts.

EE: Sask Pool?

PB: Yeah, and then this building, I don't think they do now.

EE: No, I guess not.

PB: The building next door that they built was built by Robin's Donuts, so it was hand-in-hand. They couldn't get anybody to go in there, and head office thought it would be great if we moved a whole bunch in there. But like I say, we were paying \$100,000 a year for this one floor. So anyways we got out of there, and we dispersed the departments, and I ended up at Pool 7, which was fine by me. I liked it down there. A good bunch of guys. I had hands-on down there.

EE: The stuff you bought went into Pool 7. So there you were.

PB: I would see things. That is where I really got my knowledge—the knowledge I have got of running an elevator. I would go down to the different departments and see what was going on. Of course, all of the millwrights would come in and see me and electricians.

EE: How long were you there?

PB: I can't remember if it was five, six, or seven years.

EE: Around 1990?

PB: 1990, somewhere in there.

EE: Yes. If you had of stayed longer, you could have been a superintendent or something at the elevator.

PB: I would not have wanted it. But it was really interesting to be down there.

EE: Yes, much more in the midst of the action.

PB: Oh yeah. And of course, the foreman dumped everything back onto me, like giving out the gloves and all this crap.

EE: Because you were there?

PB: I was there.

EE: [Laughs]

PB: So anyway, when they dumped this on me, I put a gross of gloves on my filing cabinet. A guy would come in and say, "Can I have a pair of gloves?" "Yeah, help yourself." "Can I have a pair for home?" "Sure, go ahead," because they are going to get them anyway. The first little while, we went through a lot of gloves. But after a while, it tapered right off. They knew they could have them anytime they wanted them.

EE: And carry them home?

PB: They carried them home anyway.

EE: Well, that is true enough.

PB: And we knew this. So I wasn't going to argue with them.

EE: I guess not. Well, what you can't stop--.

PB: After the first couple--.

EE: They got equipped.

PB: They were interested. Things like that that went on.

EE: How many tradesmen would you have at Pool 7 roughly, electricians for example?

PB: Roughly 20.

EE: And this would be running around the clock, or would they be 20 of them actually on?

PB: No, they would work shift work. If the plant was running, they would be there.

EE: Right. At least two shifts then?

PB: At least two shifts. If the third shift went on, they would split it further.

EE: It would require that many electricians at the elevators.

PB: Well, there are so many things that can go wrong. Then had other things that they would be doing, normal maintenance things, regardless what shift they were on. They were a good bunch of guys.

EE: And millwrights?

PB: It seems to me that we would not have 20 electricians. We would probably have about 14. I am trying to think now. You have to think back. We would have 20 millwrights or more.

EE: That is the question was there two or three or five or is it 20 or more? These are very large complements indeed.

PB: Yeah. But they would be working in all locations of the elevator.

EE: Sure.

PB: It would take them half an hour to walk from the millwright shop to where they were working. If you got four hours work out of them in a day, you did well because they would come back for coffee and another half hour back again and back again.

EE: It was just the costs of doing business.

PB: Just the costs of doing business.

EE: Getting the work done. [Laughs] And of course, the craftsman has a keen sense of not doing these things with the right of speed.

PB: Well.

EE: I remember many years ago as a kid, working a school building and building of a school in rural Manitoba. My brother and I were hired on as--.

PB: Flunkies.

EE: As little helpers in our teams I guess. The carpenter asked for something, and I headed off in a run. "You never run on a worksite," which a sound principle is of course in its way.

PB: Yeah.

EE: But it also told me something about the speed at which work would be done.

PB: Yeah.

EE: With all due deliberation.

PB: Well, this way the way it was.

EE: Right. The work you did obviously contributed to Canada's successes in international grain trader. [Laughs]

PB: In some way something must have been right.

EE: And describe any connections you see between your work and the work of farmers growing the grain. Would you add to what you commented on the directors you met, and probably other farmers occasionally visited, did they, from Saskatchewan?

PB: We had farmers in all the time. They would be driving through, and they would see the sign and in they came.

EE: "That's my company!"

PB: That's right. And of course, we would always stop and give them a tour. They would be looked after, which was fine. Sometimes they would stop by where I was. I would ask them about their crop. You know how many bushels you get to the acre. These are things they like to hear.

EE: Oh, they would like to talk about that for sure.

PB: Yeah. [Laughs]

EE: Depending on the year of course.

PB: "I'm getting 24 bushels to the acre." "Well, that's good."

EE: Yeah. "Love to get 30, but that is rare."

PB: Well, some of them got 30. I don't know what they did.

EE: And you got back to Regina to the headquarters fairly frequently, you were saying.

PB: Well, I would make it half a dozen, four or five times at least.

EE: Over the years? Not each year.

PB: No, no.

EE: It is quite a building actually right downtown Regina. The last time I had saw it was being picketed by the office staff, which given one of those terrible offers by the latest--. In fact what major changes did you see in your job at the trade over the years? We talked about some of the years of technology changing, but you also mentioned it was a great place to work, and you indicated ways in which it would be improved through the '80s.

PB: It became much more efficient. They changed a lot of the shipping belts. They could move grain faster and easier and things like that that you would see. There is nothing that I could do, but I had to keep the belts in stock.

EE: Sure.

PB: I had 32 miles of belt in the warehouse.

EE: Backup.

PB: Backup.

EE: 32 miles?

PB: 32 miles. You wouldn't think--.

EE: That is a lot of belts!

PB: That is a lot of belts.

EE: And this would be manufactured, what, it's a rubberized belt?

PB: Yeah, and different weaves. You had nylon weave and rayon weave, and some of them had cotton weave, depending on the load they carried. It was going more to the nylon one because it was stronger. But some of the old elevators still use the cotton belt and--.

EE: How did these improve the efficiency come into the elevators? You would be involved eventually in the purchasing decision made, but I suppose you would have some sense of how an improvement, more efficiency for particular areas, how would it come to the attention of Sask Pool?

PB: We used to have samplers—guys with a little bucket and a scoop—and as grain's coming out, every 20 minutes they are supposed to take a scoop. Well, they would go down there and take six scoops at a time. They would go and goof off somewhere. So we put in equipment called an automatic sampler and the guys up on the inspection floor, they would be loading an area, and they would just hit a button and a little hatch would open, and he would get a little scoop on his desk. We were paying that guy \$40 to 50,000 a year to do this. For \$50,000, we put an automatic sampler, and it would work for years.

EE: Without any wage increase?

PB: No. These guys screwed it up themselves. And I mean I watched them on a boat. I know they are supposed to take 20 minutes because my office ended up watching them, right next to the dock.

EE: This was at Pool 7 in the '90s?

PB: Yeah. In fact, the first day I was there, I was busy at my desk. It was the first boat that came in while I was there. All of a sudden, my office got dark, because this boat came in. It is sitting 35 feet out of the water, and it is black, and it just pulls in and all of a sudden there is no sunlight coming into my room. So I could see things. [Laughs]

EE: I think you were tempted at various times to step out and see how these things actually happened, when you are actually so close to the action.

PB: I would do things like that.

EE: There was a certain point of the day where you got the work done or the half day or whatever it was.

PB: Yeah. I was to a point where I could go and see things.

EE: And so, the automatic sampler came in.

PB: The automated sampler—a lot of things like this.

EE: Would your office actually be solicited by the company that had developed that automatic sampler, to buy it?

PB: It was developed here in Thunder Bay.

EE: Oh, I see!

PB: At least it was through an agent here in Northland Machinery. They were the agent for them. Maybe they weren't made here. I am not sure. But they were the agents.

EE: Of course, all that is required here is that one person in one of those elevators decides there has got to be a way of saving money doing this automatically, and once the thing is developed, it will sell itself to every other elevator in town.

PB: I didn't make the improvements. They made a lot of improvements. They used to come in the morning and there was rows of buttons to start the belts. One guy would come in at quarter after 7:00, and he would go *click, click*, and every belt in the place would run. Now some of those belts didn't carry any grain all day, but they were running all day. So they put it in so that when one belt started, another one would start with it or shortly after, because they knew the grain was going to come down that way. So we saved money by putting this in. I don't really know how they worked it, but it worked.

EE: And of course, every belt running is electric power running, too.

PB: Oh yeah.

EE: One could imagine that putting in sensor-motion detectors that would turn them on when the grain was sighted coming could save you a little bit of money over the years.

PB: Like I say, some of the belts might not run all day or might not run for a week, depending on what bins you're unloading.

EE: Your 32 miles of belting would last a bit longer.

PB: That's right. That was just spares.

EE: Of course. All replacements wouldn't be needed as quickly. Were there other changes? The company itself, did it change significantly while you were there?

PB: Later on, it did.

EE: In the '90s?

PB: Yeah. The president and the two executive officers with him retired. They all retired about the same time, and they put out another group of people in there. They weren't as crafty as the three we had. The three we had were very, very cautious, careful managers.

EE: Were they farmers themselves?

PB: Yes.

EE: Yes, who moved up to this and became a fulltime job for them. Were the ones who succeeded them most--. Were they farmers?

PB: No, I don't think so. They were all Baptist. These three guys were all Baptists.

EE: The ones who retired?

PB: Yeah. They were very fair, but very smart. They were very cautious.

EE: Not out of the same church, I don't suppose.

PB: I don't think so.

EE: No.

PB: It just happened that they all were.

EE: And the ones who replaced them?

PB: Were clowns. The one president that we had, he came down here one time, and he called a management meeting, but the only wanted to speak to people under 35. He didn't want to speak--. Anybody over 40 he wanted no part of because we were the outgoing guys.

EE: How old was he himself?

PB: Oh, he was in his 30s

EE: I see.

PB: He just wanted the new guys. "What we're going to do, we are going to set this company on its ear?" And all this crap. He never did. He lost money and just about went broke.

EE: Was he the president who took Sask Pool to Bay Street and got it publicly listed? Did that happen while you were there?

PB: Yes. I was there. It was just when I was leaving. In fact, they pressured all of management people here to buy shares. I said, "I am retiring in about two years or something, and I don't want any." But they were \$14 for a share, and they were selling them to the staff for twelve bucks. I talked to a couple of foremen years later, and they were down to about \$3 and change. And I said, "Ah, that was a good investment!" [Laughs]

EE: Even with the \$2 saving. You have to get stock options really low and choose the time to buy. [Laughs]

PB: But you know, it was the way of life. This guy he made so many errors, and we lost so much money.

EE: It was from that point in the late '90s that Sask Pool just ground its way downward to the--. Well, we won't get into the merger stories. That is after your time, and we don't have the details.

PB: There was guy who bought some old elevators in Manitoba and made fish farms out of them.

EE: Oh, is that another adventure!

PB: That didn't work and lost piles of money on that.

EE: How did the investment in Robin's Donuts develop? The company began locally of course. The entrepreneurs that you knew, were there local people involved?

PB: Sask Pool came and wanted them to buy our flour. It ended up that Sask Pool supplied them with all their supplies, their sugars, everything. And they formed another company.

EE: Sask Pool did?

PB: Yeah.

EE: To do this because you were not in the flour-milling businesses were you?

PB: Oh, we had some places where we made flour somewhere. I don't know where.

EE: Mills that belonged to Sask Pool?

PB: Yeah. We bought Robin Hood from Ogilvie's.

EE: Well sure.

PB: At one time.

EE: Yeah.

PB: And the bagging stuff was all there.

EE: Right. Yes.

PB: But they had some elevators that produced flour, but Robin's Donuts bought everything from--. I'm trying to think of it. It just had three letters. SC something or something.

EE: Mm-hmm.

PB: They just--.

EE: It was probably a sound decision. It probably made Sask Pool some more money.

PB: Oh yeah, 35 percent. In that time, Robin's Donuts was very popular.

EE: Yes, it was a time when it was going strong. Were there other changes that would be useful to talk about?

PB: I can't think of any.

EE: What about other challenges that faced you, anything that you'd want to put under that heading in your job?

PB: Challenges?

EE: Yes. Guys who thought they should have had the job?

PB: Oh, that was just at the beginning.

EE: Suppliers who--?

PB: There were a lot of suppliers who thought--. Who wanted you in their pocket as they called it, one of the expressions.

EE: They actually used it?

PB: Oh yes. They wouldn't use it to me, but that is what they wanted. And there was a lot of purchasing people were in people's pockets. Great Lakes were great for it. Oh, I had one vendor who offered me a month in Florida. He had a condo down there, and I said, "I am not interested." "Oh," he said, "it won't cost you anything. I will even pay the airfare." And I said, "I am not going. Forget it." Oh, he was very annoyed. He said, "Oh, you are really hard to get along with." I said, I told him to get stuffed. Anyways the guys from Great Lakes all went down there. Anyways, he was audited, a federal audit, and they said, "What is this Florida business?" He said, "I have a condo down there for my guests." "Oh," they said, "Do people use it?" "Oh yes." "Fine, you will have to send them a T5 slip." [Laughs] And all these guys from the Great Lakes all got a T5 slip. He sold it immediately. [Laughs]

EE: Benefits enjoyed in lieu of income!

PB: Things like that. There was offers all the time. Another guy phoned me one day and said, "I got something for you." and I figured, "Oh." So I went over, and he had a metal fireplace. He said, "Wouldn't that look good in your camp?" I said, "No." I said, "Do you know how much that things weighs?" I said, "I am not interested." "Oh," he said, "put it in the corner of your camp." He said, "It would be beautiful." I said, "I would have to put concrete base down." And I said, "I am not interested. I have a wood stove now. What do I want that now for?" He said, "Don't worry about installing it." He said, "I will get some of our Italians friends down and put it in for you."

EE: We will lay some brick.

PB: Yeah. They will do everything. I said, “I am not interested.” He really got annoyed with me. This happened more times than you could believe.

EE: I’ll leave listeners some time to draw the moral. I’m tempted to moral observations in general, but I’ll hold my breath.

PB: It just went on and on. I know one elevator superintendent went to Hawaii 17 years in a row with a local supplier. He and his wife went with a supplier and his wife, 17 years in a row to Honolulu.

EE: Wow!

PB: But he bought everything from him.

EE: Yes, I can imagine, a captive arrangement.

PB: Everything that an elevator needed went to that one supplier. I mean he would phone up and say, “Give me 25 cases of toilet paper.” This guy didn’t sell toilet paper, but he would phone the toilet paper guy up, order 25 rolls, send his truck down to get it, add 25 percent or whatever on to it, and take it to the elevator.

EE: There is a certain measure of laziness, I suppose. The elevator that was doing this didn’t have a purchasing department?

PB: The superintendent was the purchasing department.

EE: Yeah, clearly.

PB: Everything that was needed went to this one.

EE: Whoever owned the elevator could have saved money by having a good purchasing department. [Laughs]

PB: But it went all to the one vendor. I didn’t know anything about it until we were at GEAPs [Grain Elevator and Processing Society]. Have you heard what GEAPs are? Grain Processors. We went to the GEAP’s thing one night, and we were invited back to this house afterwards to this thing. This particular superintendent’s wife got half in the bag, and she was telling my wife and I about, “17 years we’ve been [inaudible] to Florida!” Or to Honolulu. Her husband came over and said, “Shut up.” [Laughs] Then I really knew it was a game.

EE: You won't tell us which elevator this was, I know.

PB: I won't. I can't. [Laughs]

EE: Damn! I don't suppose these are the most vivid memories of your job?

PB: No.

EE: Are there vivid ones that you might want to leave a record of?

PB: When I first went to Sask Pool, the fellow who hired me said, "You don't have to worry about buying dies because each pellet machine has a die about this big round and about this thick."

EE: A metal die, not a color?

PB: No, no. It is die.

EE: Yes.

PB: And the screens are pushed through this to form a pellet. And he said, "I have got all this arranged with the supplier in Winnipeg, and you just sent them down automatically." And I said, "Okay." So I was there about four or five months, and I phoned this guy up and said, "Send me four dies down." And he said, "Oh they haven't got any more." I said, "Well you have a contract!" And he said, "Oh well, you took all that was on the contract," which I didn't know. And I said, "Well why haven't you got any more?" And he said, "They are sitting on a dock in Singapore." I said, "That isn't doing me any good." He said, "No, but that is where they are." So I had to scurry around and find another company that made dies. I found one down in Iowa, who had a distributor here. This distributor here worked with me. In fact, he sent his truck to Minneapolis, and the people in Iowa sent their truck to Minneapolis, and I got the dies within X many days. I thought I was going to get fired, because when the pellet plant is down that is the money maker.

EE: Yes.

PB: I never ran out of die again.

EE: No. What had gone wrong?

PB: Well, he had contracted for 30 dies.

EE: And no one had pointed out--.

PB: Nobody pointed this out to me.

EE: The chap who told you not to worry about them didn't realize?

PB: Yeah. So I didn't worry. I didn't even look at it. I didn't look it up.

EE: No.

PB: I just phoned Sullivan Strong Scott in Winnipeg and they would send them down.

EE: Yes.

PB: And they're heavy. They are brutes, these things.

EE: Yes. They are solid steel or with holes in them.

PB: And some of them were stainless steel.

EE: Yes.

PB: Anyways, I thought I was done for. That's the only time I sweated it out. Till I got them in here.

EE: And you looked over every contract after that. I am sure.

PB: Boy, did I ever.

EE: You came in first thing every morning to check.

PB: The guys in the pellet plant, I told them what happened, and they are good guys. They took all the old ones back and ran them for a little bit more to get another day out of them, another few hours out of them. It is a lot of work to change them. You have got to use a block of tackle just to move them in and out. That was the scariest week of my career.

EE: The most vivid memory of your job!

PB: Very vivid, I tell you. I thought I was in trouble, so.

EE: Well, you survived. In your mind, what were the most important events that happened at the workplace during your career?

PB: Most important. I guess modernizing would be--. I didn't do--. I did some modernizing, but the company itself modernized. They came forward a long way. You can't believe how much more efficient they became. And that was something to remember. I was there. I was part of it. It was my job to find these things.

EE: Yes.

PB: I must tell you one story about finding things. We had a certain fuse that we used at Pool 4. It was an old, old machine but we still used it. They came and said, "I need these fuses." So I phone here, there, and everywhere. I ended up in California talking to a guy there and he says, "No, we haven't had those in 10 or 15 years." So he said, "There is a guy in Pennsylvania who makes them." And I said, "Oh, whereabouts?" He said, "Indiana, Pennsylvania." Well, I lived there for a year.

EE: There is an Indiana, Pennsylvania.

PB: Yeah. So I scrounged around and got his name and I phoned him. I need these right away! How am I going to talk this guy into it? Anyways as I am talking to him and he says, "Whereabouts are you?" You know how they talk funny down there. I said, "I am 200 miles north of Duluth, Minnesota." That is the only way they could understand it. So he said, "Yeah, I have got some of them on the shelf." I said, "Could you send me X many?" He said, "Yeah, I guess I could."

Then we got talking a bit more, and I said, "Where do you live?" He said, "Well, I live in Plumville." Oh. I said, "I got a friend in Plumville," a guy I fished with up here. He would come up here every year. We'd go fishing. I told him his name. "Oh, he's a friend of mine." I said, "He's a friend of mine too," I said. So anyways, the next day they were on the UPS coming up here. I said

to him, “If you sent them, I will get them from UPS, and I will have a cheque in the mail the next day.” And he said, “If you are a friend of Milo’s,” he said, “I am sure you will.” And they were here. UPS. And all the stuff, I sent through Fort Frances. If you send it to Toronto, it could sit there for weeks before it gets through customs.

EE: I see.

PB: But if you send it to Fort Frances, Rainy River, in that area--.

EE: It’s not that busy there.

PB: Well, it goes through that day because UPS has a deal with them at customs. Anyways, that is just one little story.

EE: Yes. These are marvellous stories. If I can waste some time with my FedEx story, my Texas friend in the Dallas area who said while we were on the telephone around 8:00 in the evening—they of course are an hour later or earlier because of central time down there—he says, “I want you to have this.” Whatever it was. He said, “I will get it to you. I’ll send it FedEx. You will have it tomorrow afternoon.” I said, “What do you mean I will have it tomorrow afternoon?” “Ah,” he says, “they haven't closed down here yet, and I will just run it down there.” And of course, 1:00 or whatever, the truck rolled down here at the house.

PB: It's there.

EE: And of course, I began thinking about Dallas to Memphis, I think, is their great hub in the [inaudible] Tennessee, and another plane flying in the night to Toronto and from Toronto to here. It’s just three legs, and if they are flying through the night, it's not difficult to get it here by early afternoon. You need that kind of system really.

PB: It really works. I had another time I needed a motor, and there is none in Canada, none in North America. This thing was made in Sweden. We put this system in. We didn't have a spare. So I phoned up and I said, “I need this motor.” “Okay, I will put it on the next boat,” he said. “No, you put it on the next airplane.” He said, “That is going to cost you a fortune.” I said, “I don't care. If I lose three cars—\$1500 to fly it—if I lose three boxcars, I lose \$1500, but if I lose 50 boxcars, you know, I’ve lost \$25,000.”

EE: Right.

PB: “So,” I said, “put it on the next plane. Put it on the next plane.” Sometimes you got to use your own discretion.

EE: Yes.

PB: And it sat in the warehouse. It's probably still sitting there. We never used it. But you don't know.

EE: Did you have a lot of redundancy—you know, planned redundancy—in this way, back-up engine, the belting you mentioned. the motor?

PB: We had some.

EE: You just needed to be sure--.

PB: But you had to have it.

EE: To keep things moving, that the grain keeps flowing.

PB: I would write so much off every year, if things were redundant. They never did it. When I got there the warehouse was jammed with stuff. I'd say, "What's this for?" "Oh," he'd say, "we haven't had that machine for 20 years." I said, "Why are the parts still here?" "We didn't know how to get rid of them."

EE: So, what would you do with that? [inaudible]

PB: Well, I would write it off. Put it in scrap.

EE: Send it for scrapping?

PB: Yeah. But they didn't know how to write it off. I had worked at places, we wrote off so much off every year. You have to.

EE: It is not actually a very complicated matter, I guess?

PB: No, it isn't. It is just bookkeeping. I call it bookkeeping. They call it accounting now.

EE: Yes. Now they have some letters behind their names and don't necessarily do a better job.

PB: When I took bookkeeping, it was bookkeeping. You had two columns in and out, and that was it.

EE: [Laughs] That was really simple. Yeah, you get an accountant to set books up for you, you end up with about 10 or 12 columns, most of which you will never use.

PB: Never use.

EE: I had this small consulting business, and I had an accountant set mine up. I find I use about four. I need all four of the ones I use. But they are there, so I use those. The other page I just don't use at all. Well, let me see. Do you think it is a good idea, it's important, to preserve and share and share Thunder Bay's grain trade history?

PB: I think it should have been done years ago. There is so much history down here. The first boat they loaded, they loaded from-- . I can't remember the elevator--.

EE: Back in 1880.

PB: They did it with wheelbarrows. They had to wheel it from there down the CPR dock because they couldn't get into-- . These are things that--.

EE: So there is a lot of history down there. The sources exist. Where there are not sources, of course, the memories are gone. But there are a lot of sources to be explored, and you are right. There is a lot of history that could be written is what it comes down to.

PB: Yeah. It should have been kept.

EE: It should have been done.

PB: We asked the terminal manager, oh, 15 or 20 years ago when he was here—manager for all their terminals, for Sask Pool's. "Why don't you have a history done?" "Oh, that is up to the GEAPS." He just passed it off. Eleanor and I asked him at a party one night, and he said-- . Of course, she is interested in the history, and she said things are going to move. Doing this is great.

EE: Would Pool 6 have been a good elevator to maintain, to keep standing, to use as a historic site or not?

PB: It could have been, I think. But they said it was too costly.

EE: It wouldn't be cheap?

PB: No.

EE: It would cost a certain amount.

PB: We suggested, some of us, that they keep it running, and when the tourists are there spot a couple of cars in and unload them, and clean the grain. You know, people would see how it was done. They were not interested.

EE: Of course, by that time this president was more interested in selling stock on Bay Street than he was about doing anything in Thunder Bay.

PB: That's right.

EE: Well, that just about wraps it up. Are there any questions that we might have asked which you could still answer now?

PB: I think I have talked enough this afternoon.

EE: Well, you have told us a lot of very interesting things, Peter. I was saying something to Owen about what we might have in prospect here, and I think Peter has delivered.

OM: He has indeed.

EE: Right. You don't have memorabilia from your employment?

End of interview.