Narrator: Greg Brown (GB)

Company Affiliations: Canadian Grain Commission (CGC), Saskatchewan Wheat Pool (SWP), Robin Hood Flour, Keefer Terminal

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Summary: Former grain handler for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool's Thunder Bay terminals Greg Brown discusses his short but vivid career in the grain industry. He describes his young work as a labourer loading flour bags onto ships for Robin Hood Flour and loading package freight on top of bulk grain in ships at Keefer Terminal. His next job was with the Canadian Grain Commission as a sampler, and he discusses his work at Pool 8 sampling boxcars and on ships. He then describes a period of moving through several grain related jobs due to difficulties gaining seniority with companies like National Grain, Canadian Pacific Railway, a private inspection group, and Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Brown describes his more permanent posting at Pool 6 in the car shed, explains the variety of car shed operations from boxcar dumping to grain door repairs for winter shipments, and recounts joining the union as safety committee member. He shares the story of being demoted for taking responsibility for grain spills caused by a drunk coworker, as well as the story of a recurring back injury while cleaning out silos that led to his leaving the grain industry. Brown discusses the process of filing for workers compensation for his work-related injury and the difficulties he faced finding new employment afterwards due to companies' aversion to workers comp. Other topics discussed include the introduction of hopper cars, dusty conditions in the elevators, other workplace accidents, the downsizing of elevator workers and the causes, and his pride in helping to feed the world.

Keywords: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; Canadian Grain Commission (CGC); Grain handling; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Grain sampling; Automation; Grain inspection; Grain transportation—ships; Grain transportation—rail; Boxcars; Boxcar dumping; Car shed; Grain car doors; Hopper cars; Labour union; Brotherhood of Railway, Airline, Steamship Clerks (BRAC); Health & safety; Grain dust; Grain elevators—Equipment and supplies; Alcohol use; Grievances; Workplace accidents; Workplace injuries; Workers compensation; Downsizing; Lakers; Ocean-going vessels; Package freighters; Keefer Terminal; Robin Hood Flour; Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR); SWP Pool 8; National Elevator; SWP Pool 6

Time, Speaker, Narrative

EE: Let's start by asking you on this fine Friday afternoon, the 19th of December '08, for you to give me your name and then to describe how you came to work in the grain trade.

GB: My name is Greg Brown. My first exposure to the grain trade was back in summer of 1963. I got hired on at Robin Hood Flour, which used to be a little loading shed on the Kam River just in between where Paterson's elevator would be, and Pool 5, 10, and 11—in that group there. It was on the south side of the Kam River. At that time bags of flour for Robin Hood would have been bagged and then sent down a chute. We would go on in the hull of a ship and carry the bags. They'd be 100-pound bags, and I was about 15 years old and probably didn't weigh much more than the bag itself that we were lifting. We would stack them in, and it was mostly done over midnight shift. That was my first exposure.

EE: This was a job while you were still a student?

GB: Yeah, I was 15 years old, so there wasn't a lot of jobs that you could get at that age. Being part of the Baby Boom, there wasn't a lot of selection of work out there. So, it came along. It was casual. You'd call in and whenever there was a boat they'd come and do it. I did it for one summer mainly to get some experience on my resume. It opened a door for me.

EE: Was your family in the trade?

GB: No, no. I had an uncle that worked in the Board of Grain Commission, but it was just a job that someone had told me about. I went and applied and was happy to get it. For me, it was the initial opening of my name on a resume and some experience.

EE: The flour that you were carrying wasn't milled here in the city?

GB: I'm not sure. I really don't know because they didn't have a facility. I don't know where it came from. It just magically appeared in the shed on the time a ship would come in, and it would be sent along rollers and a conveyor—well, not really a conveyor belt—but manually pushed along rollers. I have a feeling it probably could have been trucked in. Then we would load the bags, and they would be slid down these chutes into the hull. They seemed to be small ships because they didn't seem to be very deep, and then we would stack the bags until the ship was loaded.

EE: So, you were probably facilitating the movement of milled wheat from the Prairies to southern Ontario markets then.

GB: Probably, yeah, yeah.

EE: Ontario, Quebec, whatever it was, because these would've been little canallers that you were loading at the time, I would expect.

GB: Yeah, they weren't large ships. In fact, it started up above the water. By the time you were finished, you'd be almost at water level by the time you were done and have to climb up off the boat. That bit of experience helped me. The next job I got about a year or so later was working weekends at Keefer Terminal. You'd go down there on a 5:00 on Friday. The wages were so low back then—and I'm talking about 1964/65—they were probably about $1.50 an hour for a stevedore. By the time the fellows would work 8:00 to 12:00 and 1:00 to 5:00, they didn't want to work the weekends. So, most of the work we were doing, the big ocean boats would come in and they would go and load grain in the bottom of the ships first. Then we would come along, and we would have to level it out and put tarps down. Then we would load dry cargo again off in bags of grain or whatever in there. We would work probably 6:30 to 10:30 on a Friday night at time and half, then 8:00 to 12:00 and 1:00 to 5:00. Then, if it wasn't finished, that would be time and half, and then Saturday night it would be double time. Again, 6:30 to 10:30, and if it wasn't finished Sunday, we would be back again.

So, in essence, on the weekend I'd make as much as those fellows did during the week. But again, the wages were so low, and it was in the fall, and it was getting cold out, and these gentlemen didn't want to do the work. So, that added to my resume, and it was classified as a stevedore. Again, it was sort of levelling out grain and loading bags. That was--.

EE: Whatever the package freight, I guess, going out happened to be.

GB: Yeah.

EE: Do you remember who you were working for at the time?

GB: Well, there was Lake Shippers, Empire Stevedoring, and Canadian Ship--. I don't know there was three different.

EE: The first company was Lakehead Shipping?

GB: I think so. I think it was like that. I'm trying to remember back. I know the companies all had offices up on the second floor or third floor of the old Archibald Post Office, as did the Board of Grain Commission and these stevedore companies. We'd go there to get our paycheques. They were out of there. I know there was at least three companies at the time, and I think they merged or faded out within about five or ten years after that.

[0:05:24]

EE: Did you have any sense of which ships bound for which countries? What kind of cargo you were loading on top of the grain?

GB: Not offhand. I think a lot of it was going over to Europe or to Russia or whatever. I know one time we were unloading combines because we had to come in and unload combines that had come in and sitting there to get the hull. Sometimes the jobs would be unloading and other times it would be loading. Most of the time on those big ocean boats we would have to level the grain out and they'd put tarps and then crib it in, and sort of make room so they can fill those ships right up. They were deep hulls too because they were actual ocean boats. They weren't the lake freighters. So, I did that over the next couple of falls and winter.

EE: This was a fall job that would last until the close of navigation I suppose?

GB: Yeah, exactly.

EE: Late December or whatever it happened to be.

GB: Yeah. Usually I worked about October, November, December in I think it was 1964/65. In those years, I was still in high school and doing the work.

EE: We happened to be interviewing Captain Rolly Mann from Lakehead Shipping last week, and we heard about a lot of things, but he didn't think to mention the fact that outgoing cargos on those ocean ships might be mixed cargo—grain below and freight above that.

GB: Yeah, I was quite surprised.

EE: That's an interesting discovery.

GB: Yeah, because what they would do, when they put the big spouts in, they would load the grain into the bottom and then go up so high and whatever the weight was. It would be kind of a balance, and then they would put the tarps and load pallets. Then you would load bags and load pallets down in the area and build it up for whatever else they had to do. Mixed cargo. Sometimes it might go somewhere else to pick something up. But that was my initial experience of going onto the ships to work.

The next job came for me in June of 1966. I had just graduated high school, and again, if you're not fast enough most of the people got jobs at the mills or different places because they had family contacts. I didn't have any, so I just had to do it the old-fashioned way—go down to Canada Manpower. I had a couple of friends that would send me out. I filled up my resume on a lot of one-day or two-day jobs and that.

But my experience with Keefer Terminal and Robin Hood flour and that got me an interview with the Board of Grain Commission as a grain sampler. I started that job in, I think it was around the end of June of 1966. I worked for the summer, and then got laid off at the end of August. The first place I went to, they sent me over to the old Pool 8, which is behind the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] station. It was just a single dumper. It was strange because they actually had an automatic sampler, which was some kind of like a spiralling scoop that would scoop the grain off the belt, and a little system, a vacuum system, that would come up and fill this bucket.

Then the bucket would automatically fill, and every 15 minutes I would carry the bucket into the office and put it there and go back. What they were doing is once the boxcar was unloaded, the grain would be graded and the sample, as I watched--. I was just a sampler at the bottom end carrying the sample in. The next grade, the inspection had a little miniature set of sieves. They were a miniature version of the machines that cleaned the grain inside. They would start off with larger sieves—and it would separate straw, stones—then it would separate any of the husks and, if it's supposed to be wheat, it would separate barley or whatever other grain that might be in there till they got what initially was a sample amount. What they would do, they would have a little container roughly the size of about half a litre and level it off and weigh it and put it in there. When it was done, they'd weigh how much clean grain was had. That proportion established how the farmers got paid. The Board of Grain Commission was essentially, in those days, set up to protect the farmer and ensure that they didn't get cheated, that the elevator company wasn't tempted to put a lower grade on there. So, it affected how much they were paid or the quality or the amount of the grain.

[0:10:02]

EE: So, you were checking, really, on the dockage in terms of the removal of all this other stuff--.

GB: Yeah, that's what they were doing. I--.

EE: Then eventually at the end it would be the grade of the grain itself, the grain that was left after you removed all this stuff. Well, it would be interesting to be at the very basis of it, at the beginning of the system watching the--.

GB: Yeah, it was. Like I said, for me it was a boring summer because at the other elevators, there was a belt that would come along, and they would give you this little metal cone-shaped scoop on the end of a stick. You'd scoop the grain off yourself and fill a bucket, and you'd randomly wait as the grain would go by and just take random samples, so you got a varied sample bucketful off the belt of that car that was dumped. Now, the best part of the job I enjoyed that summer was when we'd get a boat in, and they would have to load the boat. I would be sent out onto the boat and collect the samples. The big spouts would come off, as you're probably aware, off the elevators. Being the Kam River, we would get smaller boats. It was pretty hard to get big boats in there. The spout would come, and I would, again, have that little scoop thing and I would randomly collect the samples. Collect them, and put them in, and we'd send them in in a bag. Put them in a little sample bag and somebody would take them in the office.

The grain inspector would grade them and monitor what was being loaded on the boat. If there was a problem, if the grain wasn't up to par, they'd shut it down. If the elevator company was tempted to slip in some other lower grades to build it up, they would be caught and stopped. Worst case scenario would be they'd be forced to remove the grain off the boat, which I don't ever recall it happening but.

EE: But the risk would tend to keep people pretty honest?

GB: Yeah. So, that was my exposure that year was the sampling and collecting of the grain from the boxcars, as well as going out onto the boats.

EE: Were you instructed in the speed with which to do the sampling? The rhythm you were in?

GB: Just randomly. It was take random samples, wait a few minutes, then get some more. Each scale would have a volume of--. A scale would probably be about as high as this room and maybe six feet in diameter or something. I can't recall the exact size. Then it would go, and they'd drop another draft. Each load was a fixed amount. There was a weighman, and he'd be up there in the scale because any of the grain--. The scales would weigh the grain from the boxcars as it was being dumped as well as it would weigh the grain that was being pulled up for shipping. Most of the grain that came in by boxcar was dirty, and the whole volume would be weighed off. Then the sample would be taken, and they would grade the grain as on the potential of that random sample. The Grain Commission inspection staff would monitor the quality and percentage of the grain where the weighing staff monitored on the scale the actual weight of the grain carload that was dumped on that belt.

Similarly, when the grain was shipped, the government weighman would be working beside the elevator staff and monitoring the weight and recording that. The inspector would be monitoring the samples that we caught off the boat and making sure, and if there was any problem--.

EE: The inspector was right there looking at the sample that you were--?

GB: No, the samples that were on the ship, I would catch the samples—if it were me—and I'd put them in bags and throw them off onto the dock. Another inspector, one up higher than me, would come and take the samples back to the office every 15 to 20 minutes, half an hour. About every 15 to 20 minutes, they would take a sample in and monitor it.

EE: How close to the office were you?

GB: The office would be--. I was on the ship deck when we were loading, and the offices were usually maybe—depending on the grain elevator—the size of the--.

EE: It was onsite in a sense?

GB: It was onsite. Some of them were actually overlooking the water. In other cases, they were away from it. Like at Pool 6, the inspection was on the opposite side of the track.

EE: But close enough that not much time was lost, and if there was anything going awry, the inspector could stop the loading?

GB: Yeah. No, no. You're only about three or four minutes away. Yeah, they would phone. If there was a problem, they would call right away and shut everything down. Then it would be--.

EE: Did you experience a shutdown at any time?

GB: On occasion. Not too often. On occasion there'd be a shutdown, but I did notice it more when I worked--. Because I only worked the one summer for the Board of Grain Commission—that was the summer of '66—and I was at Pool 8 for a while. Then I went over to Grain Growers over in Current River a few times on the weekends to work there when a lot of the fulltime inspectors--. Again, because the wages were so low that time, they were more concerned not about working overtime, but as much as enjoying the summer holidays. So, we would get a little more work. I was laid off the end of August. I found that job very boring.

[0:15:32]

So, I had made some friends with the staff at Pool 8. So, I started phoning them up in the following, I guess it would be about January, February of 1967, and asked if I could join their staff. It took until the summer of '67 that I could go, and I went to work for Sask Wheat Pool.

EE: Because things would have been very quiet through the winter, I presume?

GB: Yeah, yeah. But in between, something else happened. I had an unusual experience because within a year I had worked for the Board of Grain Commission as a sampler, I had worked as a sampler for John Maycock, who was a grain inspector based out of Winnipeg. He was actually catching samples for the buyers. Because as the Board of Grain Commission, we were monitoring more the farmers.

EE: The quality of the grain.

GB: Yeah. I guess the process must have been a little slow because I got hired in September of 1966 after my layoff from the Board of Grain Commission to work for John Maycock. It was a similar job. Each day I would be given--. And I worked from September up until around Christmastime. Whenever a ship would come in—he had about two or three people—and whatever the buyer requests, whether it was Robin Hood or Ogilvie's or any of the other grain companies at the time who were processing flour—I guess more flour companies or whatever—we would be contacted to go. During those three or four months that I worked there, I went to about 20 different grain elevators because they would just send me over whatever was being loaded. I'd go on there, and I'd catch the samples. Someone would drive around and pick them up from me and monitor them. Then they would send the results and phone down to Toronto, Montreal, wherever the grain was going so that Robin Hood or Ogilvie's—or whoever the purchasing company would be—knew exactly what grain was going on there, and what to expect, and that the grade was being monitored.

I have a feeling that over the next few years the process improved and the Board of Grain Commission sort of took it over because that job disappeared. I did it in the fall of '66. I was asked to do it in the fall of '67, but I went to university. So I gave the job to a friend of mine, and he did it for the rest of the season.

EE: You were just gathering the samples? You weren't told what exactly the game plan was?

GB: Well, I was told what I'm supposed to be collecting. I would have a list of where to go, the name of the ship, and what time I'm supposed to be there—morning, all day. Sometimes I would follow the ship and the ship would go, say, it might be at Pool 7 and might go over to Pool 4 in the afternoon. I would be expected to drive over and, again, collect the samples. Somebody would collect them. If not, at the end of the day I would bring them back to the office. John Maycock's office, at that time, was on

Victoria Avenue just near the corner of Norah Street. I think the building is torn down, but it's next to where there's a chiropractor right next door. There was an old kind of a wooden building that was right at that corner. That's where I used to bring the grain.

EE: He must have been, on behalf of the companies, monitoring the quality of the grain, the wheat they were buying for milling purposes.

GB: Exactly.

EE: So, it would be the quality of this as the basis for producing flour. It'll be interesting to see if we can ascertain why the companies for a time had their own independent check on what was being shipped to them to be sure they were getting good milling wheat, which I'm inferring was the purpose.

GB: Yeah, I was quite surprised because having been aware the Board of Grain Commission, having worked there before, I would assume that they were going to be more responsible. But I guess, I don't know how long the process took to get the information, where with Mr. Maycock—the grain inspector being privately hired—he would have those results right away and be on the phone, and they would know. So, maybe it was a problem of time between getting the information. I'm not even sure if the government was giving them at that time. But I know that that was an unusual situation. I wasn't even aware of it until I got hired by it. It was a fun and interesting experience because, at that time, I got to go to every grain elevator in the city. Get on, go in the boat, and visit them.

[0:20:08]

EE: That would be interesting. Was he himself here, or do you remember who--?

GB: I believe he told me he had moved down from Winnipeg.

EE: I see, so John Maycock himself was here.

GB: Yeah, he had moved down.

EE: I suppose he has passed on since then?

GB: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Because he would be the one to ask what exactly what was the game about. [Laughs]

GB: Yeah, looking 42 years later, I think he has passed away.

EE: I suppose he has.

GB: I know that within about four or five years I think they were gone because I didn't hear anything more about them.

EE: Well, it may have been some pressure on the inspection system, or it may have had something to do with what was happening on the farms in terms of what was actually being grown. There were concerns about the quality of the wheat. I'm just guessing, so we'd better press on. So, you're in the summer of '67.

GB: Yeah, so I did that. Yeah, the summer of '66 I worked for the Board of Grain Commission as a sampler. The fall of '66 to December I worked for John Maycock as a sampler. In about January or February, I had a choice. I could have reapplied for the Board of Grain Commission, but I found the job kind of boring, and I didn't mind working. I found it a long day just sitting there waiting for an automatic sampler to fill up. So, I asked the general manager and the superintendent at Sask Wheat Pool 8 if I could get hired on. They remembered me, and they finally opened up, I guess, for the summer about June or so, and I got on there and I worked for a couple of months.

EE: Holiday replacement perhaps?

GB: Yeah, I came and worked on the staff where we were assisting with the unload of the boxcars and doing other odd jobs around there. Because he remembered that I had sampled on the boats, they allowed me to go and sample on the boats for Sask Wheat Pool. It was an interesting job. There was rumours that there was going to be a layoff. I think they were starting to have crop problems. I had an opportunity to go to summer school, and I left about probably a couple weeks before I would have got laid off. That was in July of '67. I did apply the next year to go back, and I asked later on, but between July of '67 and the spring of '70, nobody got on the seniority list. I think one or two people made the seniority list. So, there was a series of either crop failures or problems that affected the hiring of the staff because I noticed I wasn't able to get back on in '68 or '69.

I did get a week's worth of work at National Grain, which is I think--. I can't remember if Cargill took them over or if they were the one next door. I can't remember. There used to be two grain elevators out by the Mission, and the one that I worked for in 1968 was National. They still had a coal boiler, and I got hired through Manpower to go out there. I'm thinking I'm going to work at the

elevators, and I spent a week shovelling a boxcar of coal, unloading it to provide heat for their boilers for the elevator. Then they laid me off.

EE: Shovelling, what kind of coal was this? Fair sized pieces?

GB: Yeah, chunks ready to burn. So, it was probably processed enough that it was to be burned in their boiler. They had a coal room, and back then a lot of the elevators—I guess you could get the coal cheap enough—it didn't make sense to go to oil or gas wasn't around at the waterfront at that time. So, quite a few of them had those old coal-fired boilers.

EE: Well, that's an experience for sure. Shovelling coal, and not just a bit of it.

GB: Yeah. So, thinking I was going to get on at Cargill, I ended up just getting a week in and shovelling coal. Then I was off again. Finally, in the spring--. Well, what I did for one of my summer jobs in the time was I worked in the mines, and I worked in the mill and different places.

EE: Paper mill?

GB: Yeah, Great Lakes. The one job that I had in the summer of '69 I got—I started in, well, actually the spring I guess about April—was working for CPR. I was classified as a carman's helper. What we did at that time was actually repair the boxcars and sweep them out. They'd come in, and the boxcars back then actually had wooden liners inside them. The problem was the elevators, when they started having the automatic dumpers or whatever, were starting to damage the inner walls. At that time there was a lot of work because we'd have to clean out the grain that would fall in behind. The inside of the boxcars had steel supports and then the boards would be nailed to it, so it was like a house almost having no insulation sort of in between the walls. The opening at the bottom, you'd have to clean them out. I learned how to assist, repair, we changed the brakes and the wheels and that on the boxcars. So, it was a bit of experience from that point of view of having unloaded the boxcars to being able to clean them and that. So, that was a little side venture that--.

[0:25:44]

EE: These were steel cars on the outside, but they had been lined with wood, fastened to the--.

GB: Yeah, with wood. It was mainly to keep the grain a bit cleaner and to keep it controlled. That was in the summer of 1969, and I worked there until, I guess, the middle of August and got laid off. In those days, between 1967 to about '70, it was very hard. The

companies, no matter who you worked for in town, were reticent about giving seniority. So, if the seniority was 90 days—some were 60 days, some were 90 days, most of the time it was 90 days—they would often work you 85, 88 days and lay you off. So, you'd come back, and you'd start over at the bottom, so you'd never get seniority. They didn't have to worry about carrying you for benefits or on a list or anything like that. You'd go from one place to another. During those years, I had worked—less than three months—almost every industry in town. It was great on an experience venture, but it was very difficult to get seniority.

EE: Were you a member of the union at any of these times?

GB: No because you had to be--. I think we paid union dues, but we didn't have seniority, so there wasn't a lot of formal protection from that point of view. They were very careful to make sure that you were laid off. Like I said, in the spring of 1970, I had tried for three years to get back on the grain industry. I went to Pool 8, where I worked before, and the fellows that were still there that were in charge from when I worked there three years earlier in '67. They remembered me and were quite willing to hire me, except that it was a slow spring that year. He called me in March, and he said--. Oh no, it was April 16th. It was a couple of days before that. He said, "We're not going to open for a while, but," he said "if you'd like to get back to work, Pool 6 is opening and I'll put your name in there and you can get back."

I started. There was, I think, about 12 of us that started that day, April 16, 1970. I had come over from Pool 8, so I had experience from before. Eight or ten of them were mostly people off the street that had gotten hired at the old Pool 6 over here. Couple of fellows had worked previously and had some--. It was only about two or three of us that had previous experience.

EE: You were all treated the same?

GB: Yeah. Started at the bottom, sent out in the car shed at Pool 6. Pool 6 was a nice elevator. It was the safest elevator because most of the other elevators they had long winch cables, and the boxcars would be shunted through by the railway, and they would go right through. Especially, you can see some of those elevators—like if you go by Pool 7 or whatever—you would see the cars go right through and there would be a trestle in behind, and they would have them there for each track. Each track represented a dumper. So, if there was a dumper or a shovel--. Most of those other elevators have been modernized to have a dumper of some sort. The little houses 5, 10, and 11 in Westfort still shovelled manually where you had those boards on a cable, balance them, then you'd come in and put them down. But Pool 7 and Pool 6 had dumpers. I think Pool 4A had them. Some of them had, I think, Pool B had an auger of sorts, that was kind of like an auger that would pull the grain out. I think they eventually went to a small bobcat.

EE: [Laughs] Which would run inside it?

GB: Yeah! Little tiny thing which would just go in off the ramp and scoop it out, which is just amazing because it would just spin around considering the cost and that. But Pool 6 was unique in that it had eight tracks. It had four dumpers, had eight tracks, and the tracks were spring loaded. So, when the rail engines would push the boxcars in, it would leave them on the left track as you face the elevator. There was a spring, so when you had a long cable on a winch that would run out, and you would put the hook on there and they would pull the cars in. As they got up closer, there was a bit of an elevation, and as they got in front of the elevator, the wheels would force the spring open. Then when it got through and inside, the spring would close so that when the boxcar was dumped, it would automatically come down and make a turn and go down this parallel track right beside it.

[0:30:35]

It did cause some problems in winter times or if somebody let go of the winch. There was one gentleman that you couldn't talk to him when he was on the winch because he'd let go as he turned to you. [Laughs] I can remember a couple of times a boxcar, the front wheels would be through the opening and the back wheels would be on the wrong tracks. So, it would get derailed, and then they'd have to come and jack the car up and set the wheels and do it themselves. So, it was a safer elevator, Pool 6, from the process of getting the boxcars in and out.

EE: Can I just press you on the various ways of unloading that you've just mentioned? Thinking in terms of the cars that were damaged on the inside. The ones that had the boards on cables inside, would that kind of system do more damage to the inside of a car or not?

GB: No, no. It was mostly the dumpers because they had a big steel baffle. I later ran the dumpers at Pool 6—and I would go over to Pool 7 as well when they needed me—and they would have, it was like a big arm that came down and had two big posts on it. It would just push against—it had a breaking arm—and it would push against those boards. Now, in those days up until the early '70s, they had what they called grain doors, and they were boards that were 7 feet long by about 6 inches high. They would be overlapped. Sometimes they would leave a little space at the bottom and put a piece of canvas in underneath it. These boards would be nailed together and would be in sections, probably maybe 2 and a half feet high. You'd put three or four of them—probably three of them at that time because they'd be about as high as the table—and they'd be nailed together with short nails.

You'd spike them into the wall for loading because in the wintertime when navigation closed, we would have to load. We would nail three doors in, and then you'd be up about probably about two feet from the top and then the spout would go in. So, we figured out that's how they had to have loaded it to send it to us!

EE: This must have been happening on the Prairies on the line elevators.

GB: On the Prairies, exactly. It was the only way they could do it. They'd put those sectional grain doors in. That was probably property of the railway because when we were done, we would have to leave the grain doors inside. Those boxcars would be sent down, and there used to be a crew—whether it was a CP-fed elevator or a CN-fed elevator—the crew would be down there, and they'd go in there and they'd take the grain doors out and stack them and ship them back.

EE: So, the mechanical unloaders would, what, open these?

GB: Well, what they were supposed to do if they did it right, you'd come down and you'd lower the door down, stop it, give it a bit of pressure, and then push.

EE: Push it into the grain?

GB: Push it up against the grain. Up against the grain.

EE: So, the grain could begin sliding out.

GB: But there was enough strength in the leverage that as it did, it would push the boards up and then it would go straight up. That would stay above, and the boards would be held above--.

EE: And the grain would be flowing underneath?

GB: Yeah. Then the grain would come out and there would be a doorman, would be a fellow that would come in and make sure there was no pieces. Pick up any pieces of wood that would be there if it splintered or whatever. What happened in the process time, I would say, between 1970 and '71—around that time—the railways were deeming it to be very costly for lumber to do this. So, they came up with this brilliant idea that they turned around and gutted all the wood out because they were tired of repairing it, figuring the cost, and left it just an open steel structure so no grain could get in behind. Every so often—I guess it would be maybe every 18 inches or whatever—there'd be two pieces of steel that would come together. It was framed around the doorway mostly. There was this layer of steel. What they ended up doing was giving us these big sheets of carboard with metal straps through them, every about 6 or 8 inches. They switched from using these wooden doors to using cardboard with metal straps every so often.

[0:35:11]

They would have these double headed nails, like they would have a little neck on them. So, when the nail would go in, it would go up to where the neck was, and it would leave maybe 1/4 or 3/8ths of a head on there so you could pull it out afterwards. Afterwards, they would just rip these things out and scrap them. But for us in the wintertime when we had to load, it was a problem because it would be 30 below and when they loaded, they pushed the boxcars out on the trestle in behind. You're out right on the water, 30 below—40 below with the wind—and when they had the wooden doors, you could have 3- or 4-inch spikes and you could still grapple with them with big mitts. But when they went to cardboard and those small nails, which were probably a couple of inches with the neck, you couldn't wear them. Everybody froze their hands because I wore like light gardening gloves—something that could keep me a little warm—but I needed something to hold the nails.

We would have to re-nail cardboard in to load in the wintertime because shipping would run from mid-April until December. Now, as I recall, almost every year there would be a time limit. It would be usually around 15th of December, 20th of December at the latest, that the ocean boats—the salties you would call them—would have to be gone because they would have to get through all the locks and be out of the system. The lake boats had and probably we would work between Christmas and New Year, there'd probably be some of them be the last ones out depending on how much ice was in the harbour to get them out. So, once those boats were gone, to continue with shipping during the wintertime, we would have to do it by rail. When they switched from the wooden grain doors to the cardboard with the straps, that was pretty hard on the hands. You'd be freezing your hands. It was not a fun job anymore.

EE: No, I would think not, but people had to continue to do it, I guess.

GB: Yeah, yeah, that was it. Another thing that changed around the time of the early '70s—'71, '72—the government started funding those big gondola tank cars. They first appeared back about 19--. I think the odd one came about 1970/71. By '72, they were really getting more into it and getting away from the boxcars. Occasionally, like if a farmer has a small order of grain to ship and it wasn't a full boxcar, sometimes they would put a divider in just about two thirds over, so that the spout would get in. They'd put one lot of grain in there and a divider. But it was very awkward. You had to shovel those out because you couldn't conventionally dump them because you'd mix the grains. It didn't happen too often.

I guess rail costs were starting to get more expensive, so if you didn't have a full boxcar, there was a lot of wasted space in there. When the gondola tank cars came out, they had four compartments that were hopper bottomed. Then essentially there was four compartments, so you could rent one, two, three, whatever. Somebody else could share with you. That was the changeover. The original cars that we saw, some of them were square, rectangular. They started, I think, figuring out the round ones were a little more efficient and easy to load.

There was one design that came back, I think it was in the summer of ’72 or something like that, and at that time there was funding. We were getting the grey cars. Saskatchewan Wheat Pool had the heritage fund. You’d see the yellow ones. I think the blue ones were coming from Alberta, and the Board of Grain Commission had, I think, red ones or orange ones. There was all different aspects of funding from the government that started funding the switchover from these cars. One of the designs we were having problems with, and I guess some engineers came along and thought they had it. They tested it. The plate, there was a little kind of on each side of the plate. So, whether you loaded from your side of the track or my side, depending on where you were working, where the hopper or the opening grate was in the floor so that you could drop the grain. It had kind of a wheel on it. It was kind of a round hub, and it had four holes in it. You took a bar and you’d put it in, and you would pry down to open it. I guess when they designed these hatches—I would call it an elbow because essentially it looked like a folded arm. As you opened it up, this arm would move back and open the hatch enough that the grain would come out. You’d open a little bit so you could control a little bit, and a little bit, and a little bit because there was a lot of weight on that plate.

[0:40:16]

Well, when the engineers designed this one model, they didn’t realize that they had made the elbows too long. So that when you tried to pull it back, the little what I would call essentially looked like an elbow, was too long and it buckled. They must have tested it without any grain in the car because it worked fine with no weight! But when you get on there, it buckled. These guys were coming down, engineers were coming there and looking at us workers. Some of the fellows were uneducated or maybe Grade 4, Grade 8 education that I’m working with, and we were telling them, telling these engineers what the problem is. “It works fine until you get weight on there.” We told them exactly that these things would buckle. I said, “You’ve made them too long. Shorten them.”

Well, they just laughed at us, and thought, “Well, who the heck are you guys? You uneducated workers, labourers, telling us engineers how to design something?” I can remember that was an unusual experience. We all had a good laugh over that thinking that they didn’t test it with the weight of grain on. It was soon corrected and became easier. After that, it eliminated a lot of the use of boxcars, which we didn’t mind.

EE: Did you have a sense where these gondola cars were coming from? Who was building them?

GB: I’m not sure who was building them. I know they were purchased by the government or by the Alberta or by Saskatchewan governments or heritage funds or whatever they had in regard to the grain. They were coming. So, I’m not sure where they were made, whether they were made down east or whatever. Then CN and CP would have the registration of them, but I’m not sure technically if they belonged to the governments or--. A lot of them would have a registration. Because, I mean, you could look at

boxcars at the time and see whether it was registered to CN or CP or whatever by the coding, and I think these were more government, so they were probably--.

I know there was a problem with the railway. They bought a lot of newer boxcars from the 19—at that time—'60s or '70s or whatever. They would send stuff down to the States, which they hated to do because you'd get these assortment of boxcars coming back. They were pawning off 1930s wooden ones, [laughs] you know? And you'd try and lose them. They hated doing that. It was costing them too much money, and the system was lost.

EE: Because these old ones were coming back from the States?

GB: Yeah! And not being replaced with theirs. They were sending, "Oh, we owe you a boxcar. We'll give you this one, one of ours we're not using." They'd get an old wooden one coming back needing a lot of repair with the brakes or something. There'd be a lot of mechanical repairs to do. Well, there's not a lot of mechanical stuff, but the brake system, shoe pads, the brake reliever arm, different things like that. They had coupling problems or whatever. So, the tank cars were a lot easier from the farmer's point of view, from the railway's point of view. For us, it made the job a lot easier. We didn't have to dump as much.

EE: It must have changed the physical arrangements, in fact, in the unloading sheds at the elevators?

GB: Yeah. Even to load like in the wintertime, when we wanted to ship grain, we would have to take the boxcars in and put the doors in them. At that time, it had been cleared out and there was cardboard in the straps and that. Where with the tank cars, we'd come in there and they would have been cleaned out. You'd go on the roof, which meant from standing on a rise scaffolding that might be 6 feet off the ground to a spout that came out going to an overhead spout and having to stand up on top of the catwalk of the gondola tank car and pulling the spout and lining it up and then pushing it ahead and that. There was a bit of concern and risk over we had to change the type of scaffolding and protective walkway because you had to have something to grab onto. If they shunt those cars ahead and you're on the roof there, you could fall down and be hurt. So, it created a bit of a concern and a problem. In some ways--.

EE: Were there many injuries? One can certainly see there'll be [inaudible] concern.

GB: Yeah, a lot of it was covered up. In fact, I actually lost my job over that because I was asked to be a safety steward.

EE: You were now in the union?

GB: Yeah. I had gotten my seniority.

EE: Lodge 650 of the grain handlers?

GB: Yeah, yeah, exactly. At that time, it was BRAC [Brotherhood of Railway, Airline, Steamship Clerks]. We were under BRAC.

EE: Brotherhood of Railway, Airline, Steamship, et cetera, Clerks?

GB: Yeah, exactly! So, we were under there. I'll just digress. Yeah, I got my seniority. I started in April 16, 1970, and worked through. It was such a busy year because they hadn't been busy for three years. It was just going, and we worked a lot of overtime. In that first year, we were working three nights a week from 6:30 to 9:30. So, we'd get nine hours a week plus Saturdays. We pretty well went steady right from the middle of April till about December. They hired extra crews on, and they had two crews cleaning and one crew dumping. We'd come back for overtime on Saturday. So, I got my seniority finally, but what was happening as well was that they would hire students and people in the summer or the fall. I guess they got some people on for seniority, but then they started pulling these little tricks where they would hire people on, and you'd work for the summer—and a lot of time they'd try to hire students because they know they would leave, and they wouldn't be adding to the seniority list.

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But in the fall, they couldn't get students, so they would hire people to come, and they would work them up to around December and lay them off, and then call them back the next year. Now, I happened to get a copy—which was a dangerous thing to find out—is you look in your union book. There was a little notation in there that if you were recalled within 12 months, you carried your seniority. They weren't telling people that, and they were starting people over each year starting from day one as if you hadn't worked there. Well, I found out in about 1971, when somebody gave me the big mistake of giving me a copy of the book and I read it. I'd see these fellows coming back, and I'd say, "How long did you work last year?" And they'd say, "85 days." "Okay, work a week, and then go tell them you got your seniority."

So, I'd send them in the office, [laughs] and they were quite upset having to give seniority to these people because they thought they were starting them over again. So, I got in a little trouble over that. I was given the position as safety committee member of shops. Not as part of shop steward as much as a safety committee member. So, continually they would come and report on unsafe situations—stairwell, scaffolding, whatever they needed, protective measures—and I would write up a report, and the president or the chair would sign it. I was secretary and signed it. Most of the time the company ignored the reports until there was an injury or an incident, until somebody got hurt or whatever.

Of course, the Ministry of Labour and Workman's Comp would investigate. They'd come in and go through the files. "Ah!" There was a report made out months ago or years ago with my name on it. So, I suddenly became a black sheep and got into a lot of trouble over that. I was eventually forced out of job later because of that.

EE: You were working for Sask Pool all the way through these years?

GB: Yeah, primarily. Yeah, with the exception of the Board of Grain Commission and the Keefer Terminal.

EE: Leaving that aside, but when you were an actual grain handler, was there any reason why you were with Sask Pool? Were there alternatives?

GB: I guess there was. At the time, I could have gone back to--. Well, I had worked for City Engineering one summer—got laid off. I worked for the mines and got laid off. I worked for the railway. All these positions that I thought that I got laid off, which meant I had other door options that if it didn't work out, I didn't burn my bridges. I could've gone back and had the experience.

EE: What about other grain companies?

GB: But I liked Sask Wheat Pool. I liked the safety of Pool 6. I liked how it was out and was in safe conditions. When I had gone over to the other elevators, you'd see cars pushed through, you'd see cables breaking, and the cables would just fly through, and they could've decapitated or cut people in half. I didn't like the idea of having cars pushed through. I liked Pool 6. It was safe. They were a great crew of people to work with.

EE: Did you work primarily at 6?

GB: Yes. I worked at Pool 6 right from April of 1970 till February of '71. I got laid off. What they were doing was they were cutting back and transferring people to Pool 5 to shovel for a month. I got laid off just before the last group went over there. I was off probably six weeks, and then I was recalled in March—middle of March or something like that—actually they sent me over to Pool 4, and I worked in the annex there for two months. I kept wanting to get back to Pool 6 because I liked it there. Finally got a transfer and they put me in the annex there, and eventually I was able to get back out to the car shed. I liked the car shed because I was outside. Most of the jobs in industry, whatever it was around there, it was monotonous, repetitive, assembly-line work where you did the same thing over and over. The variety of work that I did at Pool 6 was nice because I was out in the car shed if there was a problem, a derailment, whatever. If there was a spill, they would take a crew off, shutdown, and we would go and do repairs.

I got to help the electricians. I got to help the millwrights. Every time a boat came, I would sample on the boats. There was a lot of variety.

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I got promoted up to winchman to run the winch, and then I got promoted to hopper man, which ran the lever that controlled the opening of the belts. The final position I held was dumper man. I was probably the third dumper man, which meant that when they added the second shift on, then I would be guaranteed a job. I enjoyed the work there. At that time, I really liked working at the elevators because you felt like you were helping to feed the world. It was very fulfilling.

EE: You were, of course, in a sense.

GB: Yeah! And at the time, there was a lot of bitterness. We were selling a lot of grain—or the government was selling a lot of grain—over in the ’60s, especially in the early ‘70s, to Russia. There was still that anti-Russia/Soviet feeling.

EE: Anti-communist.

GB: We heard stories coming up from the Americans through the Grain Commission or whatever. They were talking about the Americans down in North Dakota or wherever they were gathering the grain. Canada seemed to sell more grain to Europe and to Russia—Soviet Union, whatever—because we had good quality grain, and we took pride in what we did, where there was a lot of embittered people in the States there that you heard stories about them breaking glass and putting stuff in.

EE: Adulterating the grain?

GB: Well, downgrade the grain, and there were a lot of concerns and excuses. So, our reputation was good. When you thought about it, and you saw stories about starvation in Eastern Europe, and you knew the grain was going there of all the products, it felt good. I enjoyed it. There was a good variety. I would have loved to have stayed there if I hadn’t gotten hurt or got lung damage.

EE: And is that what happened?

GB: In essence, yeah. At the time when I started in the ‘60s up to the 1970s, most of the grain elevators were the same as what had been there, you know, 80 years earlier or whatever—the turn of the century, early in the ‘20s. I think even Pool 6 was built probably in the 1920s or something. So, there was an air of very little change. When I used to go around to those smaller houses, in

essence they were unchanged because they had the same shovelling. They would take one or two boxcars. They were set up individually. There were so many companies started up. I think there was probably six. There used to be two old grain elevators, small ones, I think with single—I don't even think they had dumpers—they were probably shovelled by car. There used to be, where Dow Chemical is next to Great Lakes, there was two elevators in there. One was Searle. Then you went up the river and the next one would be Paterson's. Then Sask Wheat Pool had 5, 10, and 11 together. Then there used to be, right at the end of the bend of the river, was Westland D, which was right at the bend of the Kam where it went around there. Then there was all sorts of small ones mixed in there, Pool 8.

What had happened was, in essence, was if you see old photos or pictures or you remember images of Thunder Bay up until 1975, you'd remember big yellow clouds of dust, which was happening. It was a dusty place to work, and if you were inside--. That's one of the reasons I preferred to work outside was I could get away from the grain dust. I always wore layers of filter. They gave us a cotton filter, and I'd wear three layers behind a metal mask. Those of us who had worked there for a while would get an old Javex bottle and trace out the tracing of this piece of aluminum. It had a little U under your nose and a little opening cut here, and we'd trace it out and put elastic on it and it would hold. You'd put little holes so that you could get some ventilation through, and it would be open around your nose so that the filter could fit here. It would filter across your mouth, and you would change them periodically depending on where you were.

So, I liked working outside in the car shed and the variety. It was a good variety of work. What was happening is because as they were operating two shifts dumping and three shifts cleaning, there was a heck of a lot of dust coming. So, the provincial government sometime during the year of 1974, decided to set out the pollution control standards. They were enforced to go into place by 1975. So, at Pool 6, they had three annexes. Annexes were groups of the bins, and the bins would be all in rows. The bins would be roughly, I'm guessing, about the diameter of about maybe 15 feet, 20 feet in diameter. But they were 110 feet high. As you went underneath, there would be a hole in the corner. So, if you had two rows—this row going that way—the opening would be a 1 foot by 3 foot opening in the corner, would be in the left corner. The bins next to it would have that opening in the right corner, so it would share a conveyor belt under between the two rows of bins. So, each one, the right-hand bins all in a row would drain onto the conveyor belt from that side and the ones from the other side would go down.

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Now, what they had done was they put cement in there and pulled it so it made a bevelled bottom so that the grain would slide down. Because the opening is on one side, they had to do it from the opposite side to do it so that you could pull the grain through and get all the grain out. But what was happening in the 1970s, the Board of Grain Commission required an audit of every bit of grain in an elevator every two years. So, Sask Wheat Pool had two finished rows of annex bins, and on the floor upstairs where

they had this kind of a track and conveyor belt and what they called a dolly—or a tripper, I should say—that went along, and you could either go to the left with it or to the right. When the grain would come from the cleaner deck or the scale, it would be shipped along these belts and then it would be directed into the, again--. The track would go down a row between these two bins, and there'd be hatches on the floor and they'd open the hatch. They'd park that tripper.

The tripper, it sort of went along the conveyor belt and it sort of formulated a chute, and you could put a divider there and you could open it up so that it would come out on this side or come this side. You'd move it along, and they'd tell you which bin and you'd line it up. It had electric motor on it, and you could steer it over and park it and load it. Then you'd watch, and when that hatch would grain, you'd put the hatch down. Then the bottom had the concrete that would create the bevelled floor. But the Annex 3—like, Annex 1 and two had been finished—Annex 3 was that old one. If you can remember Pool 6 and looking at the side where it had been demolished and left, okay? One and two were end on end, and Annex 3 was over by itself. The grain would come through and across over. These bins were open in Annex 3. They were the original old ones. They were open, dusty. At the top you could see in between and at the bottom, they were flat.

So, what they would do was they would take clean grain and put it in and pull it onto the belts so that the clean grain would form an artificial floor in there. Then all the grain that was dirty would go to Annex 3 until they had time to clean it. Now, when I started in 1970, we were only handling wheat and oats. Then in 1971, they started switching to other types of grain. In 1971, early part of '71 while we were still handling the wheat and oats, somehow some wheat--. Well, I guess, time had passed, and I can confess what had happened without getting this gentleman in trouble. But there was an older gentleman, and what happened on the night shift, the second crew they'd dump 8:00 to 4:00 and 4:00 to 12:00, and then the grain would go. It would go up to the scale floor, get weighed. It would go to the cleaner deck, and then there was three shifts cleaning.

But in the annex, while we were waiting for the grain to move, there'd be nothing going on between 2:00 AM and 6:00 AM while the grain was being cleaned. So, there'd be a gathering down in the scale floor, and there'd be a little bit of drinking, card playing going on. Well, this one old fellow was an alcoholic and was drinking. He came back up there, and he was just plastered. He was the head guy, so he was supposed to be--. On our crew there was three of us, and he was supposed to be in Annex 1, and the next senior guy is Annex 2, and the little guy—me—was in Annex 3. All he had to do was wait for the bins to fill, and when they filled up, you'd push the buzzer, and the belt would shut off and you'd transfer to another bin. Well, this fellow came back, and he was so plastered he couldn't walk. So, we tried to cover for him. We told him, "You go to Annex 3 and push the button when it's full." Well, he passed out and didn't.

What happened was this open bin overflowed wheat into oats. What they did, every other row—I guess they called it a star bin—it created a star. When you've got rows of bins together and you put them there, there's kind of that shape, it's like a four-curved they

called it a star, but it was the spaces in between. So, what they would do at the bottom of the bin, they'd open a hole in it and then they would fill it up so as not to waste space. They'd put grain in there, so every other bin would have this star attached to it so it would have a little more capacity. We'd have to go down and shovel them out. But what had happened, the fellow that had been drinking passed out and didn't get the shut off. It overflowed oats into wheat, which meant that all those bins that it overflowed into—four or whatever—had to be cleaned again.

[1:00:27]

And so, I got reprimanded, and I didn't want to see the poor fellow get fired. He had a family and that, and I thought, "I'm a young guy. I can take it." So, I got reprimanded. Well, two nights later he did the same thing again. So, they yanked me out of there pretty quick, and I thought, "Well, they couldn't fire me. All they could do is reprimand me and demote me and that." I at least covered up for the fellow in the end.

EE: What would be a firing offense?

GB: It was pretty hard. [Laughing] Pretty hard to fire anybody in those days. There was a lot of cover up. There was a lot of drinking within management because it was a boring job in a lot of places inside. I liked being out in the car shed, so I was quite happy to go back, and I put up with my two weeks of punishment of cleaning. But what had happened was I filed a grievance, and the grievance was that they couldn't fire me, but they lowered me down to labourer's wage. What had happened was I had seniority. Now, I was entitled to get an indoor man rate, which was the next one up. When I worked in the annex, I was up about two or three levels on the pay scale. So, when they do that, I went to them and said, "You have to pay me my seniority entitlement," which is this indoor rate which is about 25 cents more an hour than what the labourer's was.

They didn't want to do that, so I filed a grievance. The grievance was overlooked at the first level, which was going to the general manager. He overlooked it. Then it went to the superintendent, and he chose not to. So, then I got assistance from, at that time, our union leader, Frank--. I forgot his last name.

EE: Frank Mazur?

GB: Mazur. He was head of the union. So I went down to see him. So, then we ended up down at the office and we filed it in. I won my grievance because they had to award me my thing.

EE: Frank would see to it.

GB: But just between being on the safety committee--. Well, actually, this is what put me on the safety committee because that incidence of winning my grievance in the spring of ’71 made me sort of a hero. Well, not really a hero, but people looked up to me because I stood up to them, fought my rights, because too many of them would take the abuse and not stand up for what should’ve been fair treatment. I always believed in social justice and fair treatment. So, when I won my case, I didn’t last very long cleaning up because when they had to pay higher wages, they soon put me back into the fold of running winches and that. But I learned my lesson, so I preferred to stay out in the car shed. After a period of time, I got promoted up to that and the incident was supposedly forgotten, except by management. I was approached to be a safety committee member and watch out for the fellows and put in the reports. That’s fair. I wasn’t a union militant. I wasn’t out there saying, “We want more wages!” or anything like that, just safe committee.

EE: That was Frank’s job!

GB: Yeah! Safety committee and that. So, it kind of caught up. It came around and caught me in the end there because one of the superintendents was on my case for--. I showed up and did my work. I had the blessings and the respect of my immediate supervisors who would call me in. I even got called for overtime at Pool 7 to come and dump. So, if I wasn’t a good worker, why would they call me somewhere else? But it caught up later on, and there were periods of time when it wasn’t friendly, and it wasn’t always the nicest place.

EE: Did you finally pack it in yourself or were you finally let go?

GB: Well, no. What had happened, we had all shovelled. They called it banjoing, and what it meant was we were lowered down--. There were steel rungs, and we had to go down in Annex 3 twice every other year and shovel out the bottom when they wanted to audit it. We had done it ’70. We had done it ’72, and what was happening in ’74 was the pollution controls were coming into effect. They thought it was a good time to eliminate the dust by--. We would have to clean out Annex 3 for the last time, and then they would pour the concrete and fix it up. So, we still had to go down and clean it out. Initially, the first time I’d done it ’70, I had weight lifted and exercised, so I was pretty strong. When you went down there, there was quite a variety. It wasn’t all young people. There was some older people that had taken the job at the elevator.

As you got seniority after a year or two, so many people coming through. In fact, Sask Wheat Pool bought out the Westland Elevator Company in the spring of ’71, I believe, and picked up four elevators. One was that. I think it was a Searle, and there was a grain elevator--. Yeah, because I’m pretty sure National became Cargill, so it was the one next to it at the Mission. It was the one

out at Great Lakes, the Westland D that was there, and then there was another one. I think there were Federal elevators they were called or whatever.

That's the whole problem was confusion because over 60 years there was so many different names, and depending on what area you worked, you called that elevator whether it was a CP elevator, CN elevator. They had letters at one time, they eventually numbered them. So, it got a bit confusing. You learned a lot. "Yeah, I worked here 30 years ago, and it was a CPR elevator, or it was traded." Or whatever. I think even Pool 6 belonged to Manitoba or Alberta at one time. So, it was a bit confusing as to what the name was, what it was called.

[1:06:12]

EE: It's a challenge to sort it out.

GB: Yeah. So, at the time, I had shovelled, and there was an incident in which I was lifting a cable in 1972 in the spring and slipped on some grain and pulled all the muscles in my back, was sent off on compensation for six weeks, but they never sent for any therapy. You kind of go around arching your back. Well, my back stayed that way. I was fine while I ran the equipment, but come the next winter when--. Or there was actually a layoff.

Sometimes in the summer there would be layoffs because there would be a strike, whether it was a shipping strike, a rail strike, or there would be a crop failure that deserved it. So, it seemed like every summer there'd be people laid off. I always had too much seniority to get laid off in the summer, so I'd be having to go into labour. We had to go and shovel, what they call banjo, back in '73. I can't remember if that was an audit year or why we were down there, but it was in the summer, and I guess they decided to clean it up while they were down. They'd send the crews around. We had to go shovelling. My back hadn't healed, and I went and pulled all the muscles in my back. That time I was off for three months. Then when I went back, I was running the equipment again.

Also, at that time I had participated in a grain dust study at the Port Arthur General Hospital. I think it was either in the fall of '70 or the fall of '71, and I was deemed to be healthy. But over the next while, it got pretty dusty in there. Even though I wore the protective cotton masks, in the fall of '72, I started having throat problems. I went to my doctor and my doctor diagnosed me with having tonsilitis. They said they couldn't do the surgery, and I couldn't get enough time off because in those days the benefits were terrible. You had to be off three days, and you'd get one day pay. It was so minimal that there was very few benefits. It wasn't a lot.

EE: So, people soldiered on?

GB: Yeah. Exactly. You'd show up. I just went to work and got worse and worse and worse to the point where I tried to hang on to January, until I got my lay off—until the navigation was done—and then I could be missed. So, I went and had my throat surgery, and by that time it was so bad I was off till April. I really got called back a bit early when navigation opened, and I went back to work. I had a bit of problem, but it wasn't so bad being out in the car shed as opposed to being inside. But in August of '74—I can't remember if it was a rail strike—there was some kind of strike, but we had to go back. It was at the same time that they decided they wanted to put the pollution controls in, and we'd have to go and banjo again.

I went down there, and it was quite a let down for me because previously when we had done—and we'd done it at odd times—I would go down and when I was finished, I would go down and help the older fellows. The younger guys, you had to what they call banjo. You'd do two tanks, and you could go home. If you were fast enough—and the young guys would pair off—they'd be done at 1:00 and they'd be gone. Well, these older fellas would be in there—I'm calling them older, and they were in there forties and I'm in my twenties, some of them were fifties or whatever—and I felt sorry for them because I worked with them and they were good fellows. So, I thought, "Well, I'll give them a hand." So, I went down and gave them a hand and tried because I thought if we worked together, we should leave together. It wasn't fair to leave people behind. It was frustrating for me who had done this to not be able to do it anymore. The company was not very forgiving to my situation that I had reinjured my back and I could feel it coming on again for a third time. I went to them, and I said, "I've hurt my back again. It's going out." So, they were very concerned about compensation. Oh, they hated compensation. They didn't want to do that.

[1:10:20]

Because I can remember back in 1970, we'd only been there three months, and one of the first tank cars had come in on an experiment basis. We were unloading it, and they'd bring the tank car up full, and you'd spot it, and you had what looked like giant rubber axes and you'd wedge the wheel. Of course, they'd bring it home four times and after it was done--. Well, what they'd do is they'd push the car ahead. You'd undo the coupling so the cars would push ahead, and you'd block the empties. Well, the empties wouldn't go very far. Then, when they were done on the levers there was that lever you would pull up and you'd pull the coupling out, and you'd open them so they would couple them together. You'd couple the empties together and block the thing there. Well, the winch was behind on the far side, opposite to where we were working. The guy winched it in, and the young fellow that I was working with put his hand in there to close it. There was only a couple of feet of space, and the guy winched the thing. Well, the car came together, and it crushed his hand.

Well, because of my experience with the railway, automatic instinct—I don't even know why I did it—but I just yanked it up. So, he got the first impact of his hand coming together, and then it separated and opened up. I remember they took him up to the St.

Joseph's Hospital, and I can remember him telling me the superintendent came up there and yelled at him for ruining their safety record! Didn't care about the poor guy almost losing his hand. I mean, that was the incidence of what happened. They would yell at you.

I can remember the next January—January '71—during the time when we were loading over the winter and at the same time, we were unloading boxcars and shipping out on Track 9—the one farthest away from the river. It was lunchtime, and I was a brakeman, and I would have two tracks to watch and the other brakeman. Well, I was watching 8 and 9, and I had just gone out. Just before lunchtime, we would take the cars down maybe 100 feet or whatever and park them and connect them altogether. Then, when we were done, we would run them down almost to the mainline for the railway to pick up. I had released the brakes, and I was just bent over on the last one to--. There was a lever to release the brakes, and then you can have the wheel, so that you would climb down on the side and spin the wheel, and you could run them down and lock them up.

So, I had released--. They had no brakes on, and they sent this loaded car out. Well, the winchman was in a hurry to go for lunch and didn't realize he shipped, I think it was four loaded boxcars of grain behind me with no brakeman. They collided. In those days we still had the jagged steel catwalks, and I was bent over on the end of one trying to release the brake when--. Somebody yelled and I went face-first into it. I was wearing a big parka. My face was cut up. I tore my lip, and I was all cut up. As it turned out, I found out years later I had broken my nose too. [Laughs] And rather than take me to the hospital, they took me over to the Port Arthur Clinic, had me stitched up, and brought me back to work. Well, it was very painful, 40 below with stitches pulling at you. It was not a comfortable time. What they did was they tended to poke fun at you. "Hey. Only a sissy would complain. You've got to get back to work!" They'd accuse you of being a sissy to try and intimidate you to stay back to work and not to file a compensation claim or anything like that.

EE: This would be coming from the foreman? Well below the supervisor level, or superintendent.

GB: Yeah. Well, yeah it was pretty well the superintendent at that elevator was probably the one that would be running it and pushing it. They were all concerned about their safety records. It's a joke because at the time, even the benefits insurance--. In those years, we paid 25 percent of our OHIP. We paid 25 percent of our health benefits when we did get it, so we still had a vested interest in the employer. The first contract was 1975. Great Lakes Paper got the first contract to go for 100 percent for OHIP and for health benefits. Of course, once they got it, everybody else picked it up within the next couple of years. But prior to that we were--. But they were still watching for their safety records and trying to avoid compensation and their involvement in it.

EE: Somewhere in there your employment in the grain trade ended I gather then?

[1:14:54]

GB: Exactly. Because what had happened in ’74, I had a back injury it was coming on. It wasn’t as extreme because I caught it early enough. I could feel the warning signals that my back was going. Just for a brief description, we’d climb down into the tank and the grain would be at an angle and you’d find this opening. Once they pulled it open you could see where it was because the conveyor belt--.

EE: This is in the car? In the gondola car?

GB: No, I’m talking about the 110-foot grain bins.

EE: Okay, the big silos.

GB: So, we’d climb down the bin, and we’d go there. Two people, you’d try to fit somebody about your size and balance because you had to pull. There was a steel plate, it was a foot wide and about three or four feet—probably about four feet—long and had a long rod with a loop on it on each side. You’d pull the grain. You just pull and pull, and you’d pull until--. After you were good, you’d get it done probably in about three hours, and then you’d have a shovel and a broom and get all the grain and go to the next one. You’d do two a day. After doing it for three or four days, you got to be good at it and you could be done both tanks by one o’clock and be gone three hours early.

What had happened when I got in that situation was—the second time around after I had been hurt—I could feel it going out, and I reported it. So, they sent me sweeping in the tunnels. Well, those tunnels underneath where all the grain was coming out of the bins, we were partly underground. We were probably below water level because often there would be water seeping up. The tunnel would be six feet high and five feet wide with a three-foot conveyor belt, so you barely had room around the edge of these pulleys—two feet of space. If you’re over six feet, you couldn’t stand up because you’re pretty well hitting. They weren’t very tall. Then they would run for the length of two annexes, which is probably 20 bins deep. There was no ventilation. So, I had to go and sweep the grain and put it back on there. I did that for about four days.

On the last day, I’d come home at night, and I’d be sick, and I’d be throwing up. It was just clogging up. Here I am having had my tonsils removed, my adenoids, I had no protection in my throat. I still wore that, and I just got sick. I blacked out on a Friday afternoon. I went to my doctor and told him what was going on, and my doctor advised me to take time off and then advised me to leave. I tried to get a transfer over to Pool 4, but I’d run into the bureaucracy where my superintendent figured it was a good chance

to get rid of me. He wouldn't sign my transfer over. Because the superintendent at Pool 4 was actually the fellow I had started with 10 years earlier, or 8 years earlier, and offered me the job and was quite willing to take me.

But I had the formality of getting a sign off, and I just got tired of it. I got tired of the fighting all the time, having to watch over my back. I regret doing it because I should have gone to Frank and fought my job through the union, but I didn't think I could. I thought, "Well, I'll just go somewhere else." I didn't realize that when I applied to workman's comp and got--. I applied for respiratory damage as well as my back. In the incidence of respiratory damage from grain dust, we were too early. The first respiratory claim for industry of any kind, I believe came from the mining industry in '77/'78. Prior to that, they hadn't recognized any. What they did with me, they said, "Well, you've been there five years." When they examined me and tested me, they said, "You've got the lungs of somebody there 20 years. You must have smoked." I said, "I never smoked." I said, "I wore all the filters. I got witnesses to prove that I did." They said, "You must have some genetic defect, or something is wrong with you."

So, they didn't give me the award, but they awarded me for a partial disability pension on my back. I thought, "Okay." They were supposed to fund me for schooling—they backed out of that. I tried to go back to all my former employers, and they suddenly—because everybody was going into this changeover of getting their benefits, and the insurance companies were dictating how the rates were going to be based on the number of people working there and the number of days of absenteeism—I was suddenly not wanted. I couldn't even get my job back on the Board of Grain Commission.

I was going for interviews and then being told I wasn't qualified for jobs I'd held previously. All the job applications would ask you, "Have you ever had any compensation injuries?" You know, if you say yes and describe it. I said, "All I'm not supposed to do is just any heavy lifting. I can still function. I still got a brain. I know all the experience. I'd worked all those industries. I could step in off the street and have some experience of every industry in the city." Couldn't get through. I didn't realize it was going to be like that, you know, afterwards. Like I said, I made a mistake. I should have stayed on. Should have gone to the union and fought for my job. My wife thinks it probably would have killed me but. [Laughing]

EE: Was there any possibility that you might have achieved a job with the union itself as one of the officers?

[1:19:58]

GB: I never thought of that. I think at the time, Frank was very controlling, and he kept a lot of people in because even at the time—and I'll eventually go into what caused the demise of the grain industry—I can remember as early as 1970 being involved--. At that time, my wages when I worked in 1967, I made $2.30 an hour. When I got called back in 1970, my wages were $3.20 an hour when I started. When I left in September of 1974, I was making $4.95 an hour. So, our wages had increased about 50 percent.

At that time, even working all year round, working in most cases we worked six days a week--. The overtime three nights a week was dropped when they put the extra shift on. I only got that ’70/’71, and after that it disappeared. So, even working eight hours overtime each week for nine months a year, I still only netted $10,000 a year, which I thought was good money at the time, but I never made any more.

We had terrible benefits. We were still at the point where if you were sick, you had to be off four days. So, if you’re off you might as well take the week off because if you’re off four days you only get one day’s pay. So, we’d normally take a day off to make sure you got one cheque and it’d be $100 from the insurance company. At that time, the insurance company was underwriting you if you got sick off the job or if you got hurt off the job. Unfortunately, what they were doing was when they started basing their rates, they wouldn’t separate workman’s comp injuries from the insurance claims. They just count as a day of absenteeism and they weren’t separating, even though they had nothing to do with them. So, between the insurance companies putting pressure on the company--. Suddenly, you had to have medicals.

In the years, I only had to have a medical for Canada Car, CPR, and the mines. When I worked at the mills, when I worked at the elevators, the Board of Grain Commission, I didn’t have to have any medical. All of a sudden you had to have medicals. They were weeding out--. They were trying to check it out. On the application form it asked if you had compensation injuries. If you said yes, you were dismissed. I found even my experience, like I’d worked one summer in ’68 for the City Engineering--. I had started off at Cargill in April, worked for a week, shovelled the boxcar of coal, got laid off, and I was out of work. Couldn’t find anything in town. A neighbour was working up at the Griffith iron ore mine, which had just opened two years earlier, or had started two years earlier. I went up there and I worked there until July. They got their official opening, got cut up, and laid us off or some of us off.

I came back home, and I managed to get on with the city for a while that summer and got laid off again. So, I had worked for the city, and I had worked for the Board of Grain Commission, and I also delivered mail one winter when they used to have Christmas mail. I thought my experience was good with the federal government and with the city. While I was on unemployment, I was even penalized. Because I left sick, I had to wait an extra three weeks before I could get my unemployment, even though I had a doctor’s certificate. You’d think it would help, but it had its reverse effect.

So, back in early ’75, unemployment caught up with me and sent me on two job interviews with the city. One was sitting on a stool out at the city dump stamping the weight slips, and one was in the old Donald Street police station carrying a clipboard and writing down vehicle inspections and anything that had to be done. I didn’t get the jobs, and unemployment accused me of not taking these jobs because they were pretty well minimum wage in those days. It was probably half of what I was making at the elevators, which you know is kind of strange because there wasn’t a lot of difference in money back then. They made me go back and ask why. The personnel manager wouldn’t talk to me in the office at the City Hall. He comes out in the hall and talks to me, and says, “Look. In

the last year, I had seven people with workman's comp injuries. Every one of them has gone back off with their back injury again. I won't hire you." I said, "What has that got to do--? The heaviest thing I'm lifting is sitting on a stool lifting a sheet of paper and a stamp at the dump." He said, "You might fall off the stool and hurt your back."

I said, "What about the police garage? Walking around with a clipboard and filling out reports?" I had worked in a service station. I was a clerk in the mines. There wasn't anything that I hadn't done in the city to some extent that should have opened the doors. He said, "Well, you might slip on some oil and hurt your back." So, they sent me a letter saying I wasn't qualified for these jobs. So, unemployment left me alone, left me alone. My claim ran out for another four months. Never went out on any more jobs, they just let me go. I asked for re-training, and they said I wouldn't be involved with the--. It wasn't their responsibility. So, it just ended up that forced me out. So, I went back to the Board of Grain Commission. There was a trackman job I applied for that. The last question of the interview, "Have you ever had any compensation injuries?" So, when I told them I just couldn't do any heavy lifting--. And that was a trackman job. You walk up and down the tracks with a notepad. You write down boxcar numbers and check for leaks. I was more than qualified, and I was given a letter saying I wasn't qualified.

[1:25:09]

So, in essence, I went to the Human Rights Commission, and I said, "I'm being discriminated against by the City of Thunder Bay as well as the federal government." I explained how I had been hired for both and had the experience and couldn't even get back on in the grain industry—and they were crying for people! I came with all my experience and that, and they were all afraid. So, it got to the point where Human Rights said to me, "You know what? Back injury is a grey area. If it's not an obvious, visible injury, we can't do anything about it." So, that was my last opportunity to try and get back into the grain industry, and I couldn't.

EE: In a sense, you were blackballed because of your worker's comp claim or the series of experiences.

GB: Yeah. Because of compensation and prior to that because of being a safety committee member.

EE: So, you were left with a pension and--?

GB: I didn't even get a pension! [Laughs] The saddest thing about it, if I had have worked there six more months, my pension would have been frozen, and I wouldn't have been able to withdraw it. Because I was just under five years, they gave me $800 or whatever it was that I had contributed towards it. Didn't even get their portion, and I was forced out. Even Sask Wheat Pool told me, I said, "Can't I go somewhere else?" They wouldn't even protect me at the time. They forced me out the door. I could've gone to another terminal. I had the experience and that, but between the compensation aspect and being—I wouldn't say I was that

actively outspoken—but believing in safety, I wasn't their type of person.

EE: Did you have the sense that this was happening to a lot of grain handlers? Or was yours an unusual situation?

GB: I knew people were getting ill. Because what was happening at the time, even though the four years that I was there, at that time you had to work right till you were 65. People that had started, whether they had 30 years or 40 years or 20 years--. In fact, the guy that I worked for who was my immediate supervisor, started when he was 15 and had to work until he was 65. He was one of the few people I know who had 50 years in, which is quite rare to do.

EE: Now how much of it was in management? Most of it?

GB: No, he was car shed foreman. He was working on lines as a lead hand. He wasn't even in the management as much as he was protected by his seniority. But we used to have benefits every year—retirement benefits—and we'd put a party on, and we'd go there. As part of being the safety committee and shop steward, I would be involved, and we'd go have a little party for them. Those guys would go from doing physical work to coming home and siting doing nothing, and I don't know if it was the being away from the grain dust that did it, but a lot of them died within a year or two afterwards.

EE: At what age? At 65?

GB: In their sixties!

EE: In their sixties after retiring?

GB: Yeah, I'd say under their--.

EE: But they had managed to hack it through all those years? They put in their 40 years or whatever.

GB: Yeah, yeah. And this was all prior to the changeover to the pollution controls in '75. That, I think, made a big difference because at the time, Sask Wheat Pool let go of all the old elevators that were up in the river because it was too costly to put the piping system in. They put all those big blue and green pipes in on the bigger elevators. I know there was a small elevator that was a Federal one that was next door to Pool 7, and they ended up just using it for storage and they did away with the shovel house or whatever. I think they just ended up running pollution controls over for storage. So, a lot of them, they just activated the storage

bins, and would still ship it back and forth, but clean it over there. So, the elevators that survived--. I think in 1966, when I was working for the buyers in the fall of '66, I counted something like 20 grain elevators around the city.

EE: We've heard some very large numbers, even larger than that.

GB: Yeah, even before that there were smaller ones, but that's what I went to. I was going back because I was doing a quick count. I knew there was two at Great Lakes, there was Paterson, there was three along the river, which would probably be six. Westland D was seven, Pool 8 was eight. Then you'd go to Intercity, and you had P&H [Parrish & Heimbecker], you had Pool 1, McCabe's. Then there was a couple of other little ones that I think got combined, 7, Thunder Bay Malt--.

EE: We're going to develop a list of them. With various research instruments we're going to develop a list of them all.

GB: Yeah, yeah. There was even one that was called, I think it was called the Empire. I think it was Pool 13, and it was down where the CPR Station--. It was actually on the East End, in there. I remember going there. I think it was probably one of the last times--. It was shut down just after I worked there catching a boat.

EE: One of the questions I'm tempted to ask is do you have any kind of sense of the workforce, who managed to survive to retirement as against those who--?

[1:30:13]

GB: Well, I have a theory on that. Back in 1972, when we were at our height, I think we had probably I think 1200 people working for Sask Wheat Pool. There was probably 2000 in the whole industry at the time, when we were running probably at that time. Before the closures, like I said, there was probably about 18 or 20 grain elevators, and we were running extra shifts at that time. So, there was two shifts dumping, in a lot of cases three shifts cleaning.

The last I heard, I think--. Well, what had happened was the dangers that I was trying to indicate to Mr. Mazur at the time was they were talking about getting wage increases. They kept getting these huge wage increases. I mean, it's not rocket science. We were doing physical labour. There was some trades involved, which were millwright and electrician were mostly the trades. The rest of us were, you could say you have a skilled labour, learning how to run equipment, but anybody could be--. There was no prerequisite for education or whatever. You pretty well were trained to run the dumper, run the hopper, run the cleaning machines or whatever. It wasn't a lot of rocket science.

But for some reason, I guess during those years, I guess to keep things quiet they allowed these huge wage increases. I can remember arguing with them back in the early ’70s saying that the benefits, we had terrible benefits, and I thought that was more important. I’d rather have less wages, because, like I said, I told them, I said, “We worked all sorts of overtime.” I watched whether I was making $3.20 an hour or whether I’d made $4.25 an hour, I only cleared $10 000, which meant the more we made with overtime put us up in the next tax bracket. I tried to explain that, I said, “I never made anything extra. I’m working all these hours.”

At the end there, Bob Rae’s philosophy was something what I ended up doing. Because in ’73/’74, the last year I was there, you had to work Saturdays. But I was finding Sundays were hard because we’d work six days in a row. I’d be off Sunday, Monday morning I’d get up, and I’d be sick. The grain dust was starting to get to me, and I’d already had the surgery, so I had no immune protection. I would just end up with a sore throat. So, if I phoned in Monday, they didn’t say anything to me, but they’d go after the fellows that didn’t show up on Saturday because there was too many of them that would miss it.

I can understand Bob Rae’s philosophy in that because at the time, if I took a day off, I made more money because I netted more. I was talking to another couple friends about that recently or a few years ago, they said the same thing. If they were sick and missed a couple of days during the week, they made more money than the guys that worked through, and that was showing that problem was at the beginning.

As it was, they started getting the wages up higher and higher to the point in the 1980s, there was something got put into the contract negotiations that allowed automation and computerization. That was the biggest mistake. The companies must have put it in there. The fellows that were senior looked out for themselves, didn’t care about the guys at the bottom, because they had a big major layoff back in the late ‘80s, early ‘90s. They were cutting down in terminals and costs, and I think that was the first step was that they allowed the wages to get too high to the point where it was hard to sell the grain at the cost. I thought it’s terrible. You know, of course, you’re a tyrant, you’re speaking heresies—a heretic—if you’re saying, “You’re making too much money.” You’re a company person or whatever. I said, “No, there’s sensibility. The grain could only sell for so much. If the cost is so much, where’s the profit line?” So, they subtly and quietly agreed to allow some of the automation to come in and the computerization to the point where there’s only a handful of people left working. That to me, high wages killed it.

EE: Numbers are very small.

GB: Yeah. And the other thing that caused a lot of problems was not sticking up for the guys on the seniority list once they allowed the automation and computerization. The other thing that I noticed too, and it was a political interference from the Conservatives in the 1980s, was then when Mr. Mulroney—I guess trying to buy votes on the West Coast—encouraged the building of a super grain

elevator in Prince Rupert, which was at the end of the CN tracks, and Vancouver at the end of the CP tracks. To underwrite the cost that it took to go over the Rockies, because you couldn't--. In those years, they would put three engines on to pull mile-long trains from the Prairies east to Thunder Bay. So, we noticed that the rail costs were going up. What they did was they increased the rail cost going east. I think the term was Crow Rates, was it something--?

[1:35:08]

EE: Now, it's actually in the Trudeau--. The first parliament in '80, '84 the Crow Rate was challenged. The Western Grain Transportation Act came in, although I guess the arrangements didn't end until the early '90s, which was late perhaps in the Mulroney--.

GB: Yeah, yeah, because that was the one thing--. And the other thing that sort of caused the demise was the increase in the Seaway tolls, because I can remember all sorts of ships being there and watching them disappear. Paterson's fleet and Lake Shipping--. What was the one that's Martin's company?

EE: Canada Steamship Lines.

GB: Canada Steamship Lines. There was three main lines. There was Paterson's, Canada Steamship Line, and I can't remember--. Was it Lake Shippers or--?

EE: Doesn't sound quite right, but there was a third company.

GB: There was something. There was a third company and they specialized mostly in the ships that came up there. So, to me, watching those demises was sad. Just to see those costs. I think there was a lot of political, external interference that caused that industry to--. And the other thing I don't think a lot of people realize too, like in those days—in the '70s, '80s—if an elevator wanted to be shut down, if you weren't going to use it and you wanted to maintain it, there was an agreement with the city that you would take up the first 20 feet of track. It would be deemed inactive because you couldn't get grain into there. That was accepted. Well, somewhere along—I guess in the'90s, early '90s—that wasn't accepted by council. They said, "No, we're still taxing you."

Council was pretty hard on the elevators at a time when there might have been crop failures or whatever, and they wanted to park these elevators and leave them until they could reactivate them. In doing so, that caused the demise. That caused the demise of Pool 6 because of the fact that it was costing too much for taxes. They let it go for back taxes. They started abandoning a lot of these

elevators, and I think the city really was the final straw that hurt the grain industry besides the high wages and the automation and everything like that. They crossed a point where they couldn't come back.

EE: These are clearly major changes in the grain trade from your observation.

GB: Yeah, exactly. It's sad the accumulated fall down. I think the workers initially took a blame for allowing their wages to get too high and not to see themselves protecting their jobs. In good conscience, they were making as much in some cases more than some trades people were in other industries. How can you compare what someone makes in a trade that goes to school and apprenticeships and everything else as a learned skill as opposed to an unskilled? Anybody off the street can come and earn those wages. The other thing was you have to look at the survival. It got to a balancing point when the alternative, the agreement was the company, "Okay, we'll pay more, but we're going to automate and you're going to have to agree." The senior guys protected their jobs at the cost of the junior guys, and I think that was one of the initial points. I see these faults. If I had been there, I would have protested it, that it wasn't fair, that everybody deserved an opportunity to work. The other thing too is that when your workforce declines, then you're paying higher taxes because it's not distributed over as many people.

EE: That's quite true. They were difficult years, of course. The inflation that went on in the country in '73, '74, and afterwards which led to wage and price controls, and in the early '80s the high interest rates and so on. So, one can understand why the union might press for higher wages, but certainly the impact of these changes has been very dramatic on the industry. There's no question about that.

GB: And even talking, the benefits they were living on wasn't very good, and yet all they could see were dollar signs. It's not a way--.

EE: Were there many union meetings?

GB: There were some. I went to a couple. Most of the time it would be to negotiate the contract.

EE: Contract time.

GB: Proposed contract talks about wages and that. I can remember trying to speak out and say we wanted benefits and being shouted down. There was a problem where--. The elevators attracted a lot of uneducated immigrant workers that could hardly speak English, and they weren't understanding. You were trying to explain something and all they saw were dollar signs. They would get together and vote you down. It was sad that you couldn't reason to people and say, "Look. This isn't right. You've got to look at

the future. You've got to protect the industry."

EE: Was there any ethnic group that was most significant in the elevators?

GB: There was all sorts. There was Italians. There was Finn. There was all sorts of ethnic groups depending on each terminal as to what the gathering was. Some of them would get on, and then they would help their friends get on. You'd go somewhere and there'd be a stronger group there.

[1:40:10]

EE: There were some of these patterns.

GB: Yeah. You could see it reflected in these groups as that. They would gather together. You'd hear different languages spoken at times, which was fine from the sense of everybody kind of worked together, and you stuck up for each other.

EE: I have questions about changes, and you've talked about those changes I think, and challenges. Clearly, the challenges you faced particularly of health, which others faced as well. When you have the men who die soon after the retirement, you may blame it on the retirement in a sense, but I suspect it's more complicated than that.

GB: Yeah. I think some of it was due to inactivity. As long as they were moving and exercising, they seemed to retain their health, but a lot of them would just retire and park themselves in their chair. So, you've got inactivity. But there was still a problem with grain dust.

EE: Yeah, I can imagine there would be.

GB: I think if they went back and examined it—autopsies or did more thorough examinations into the cause of deaths and the quick demise and that—there would be more done about it. Like I really wish that I could have got a copy of the grain dust study of 1971 that I participated in because for me, personally, I was deemed to be healthy and then three years later or two years later I've got lung disease.

EE: Who did that study?

GB: I can't remember. I can remember going over to the Port Arthur General, and I think it was in the basement. They asked for volunteers, and I went over there. Couple of the young fellows, myself, we went over there and wanted to participate. I think they got a few older ones. It was either done in the fall of '70 or the fall of '71. I was deemed to be healthy and then a year or two later I've got--.

EE: Clearly not, yeah.

GB: Yeah.

EE: What would you like people to know about the work that you did?

GB: I thought that at a time when we were handling the grain, I think people took pride. We were helping to feed the world. When they talked about the Prairies being Canada's breadbasket--. There was really a feeling that I got from the grain elevators that I didn't get anywhere else. Like I can remember everywhere else I felt like a prisoner of the assembly line, whether I was pulling logs into a grinding machine or cleaning railcars or doing repetitive shovelling of iron ore, coal, whatever. I just didn't feel the same as when I saw that grain being shipped, and it took a lot of work, and it was hard and difficult and tiring. But you knew the end product was somewhere in the world. Somebody was getting food. You really felt a fairness. You felt you were being part of that chain of helping to feed the world. There was a pride in that, in it. But I think it managed to get squished away a couple of decades later by a lot of the people that worked there, that it wasn't fun anymore, that the bureaucracy of the company and the concern about profits seemed to take away a lot of the pride that one had in the job back then.

EE: What might surprise people most about the work that you did? Or interest them?

GB: I think they thought it was dusty or boring, but in a ways, it was very interesting. There was a lot that you did. I think that people don't realize the involvement of--. When they see the grain cars come through, just to see the process of how that grain was disposed of and handled, between being unloaded and shipped up and weighed and then cleaned and then stored and all the aspects of it just to get it in and out and cleaned.

I wanted to tell you something else. Part of the demise was going back about 10 or 12 years ago. As it got very expensive to ship grain from the Prairies, what was happening was in essence the farmer got paid by, as I explained, the Board of Grain Commission, the monitoring. You got your sample. They would level it off, and they had a miniature set of machines identical to the big machines that clean the grain. So, at the end they would weigh that little sample of clean grain and have the proportion of the weight, and that was how the farmer got paid. Well, if that sample was wheat, and you sifted off, that might be 60-70 percent wheat

that was good wheat, and you'd have the straw that was separated. You'd have the stones. In the old days—and I'm talking back '60s, '70s perhaps—they would use the stone to fill in the holes on the roadway. The straw, there used to be broom makers, Thunder Bay Broom used to come and collect the straw and make brooms from it. The husks used to be dumped out. But I can remember in 1970 or '71, Pool 7 made a pellet plant. When the refuse screening would be taken off there'd be cleaning machines, and they would separate it and they would shred it. The nickname was the money makers because the farmer only got paid for the portion of good grain. He didn't get paid for the husks. Well, they started--. They were dumping that.

[1:45:15]

The other cause, if you remember if anybody ever talked about the explosions and the fires from the 1950s, was we were well aware of it by the '60s and '70s that you're only allowed to store grain dust on the outside bins and they had to be on the water side so that if it blew out, it would blow out into the water. Then we had to start moving it. So, every winter we would come in there and ship it out and try and dump it. Well, whoever it was that came along and created this pellet plant, they'd send all the refuse screening over, mix it with molasses. Of course, it doesn't have the high protein that the grain has, but it would be like a filler. So, then they would sell these feed pellets mixed with molasses and all the lower grade husks back as feed pellets to the farmers. So, in essence it was coming around. They were buying this filler back.

EE: If you can make a profit on what is waste. [Laughs]

GB: Well, sure! And they didn't get paid for it because it was pure profit. Money makers was the nickname, the elevator company who was making the profit. So, what happened, as things got more expensive, the farmers got together and created co-ops of creating a cleaning elevator in a community. So, when a rail line came in in that community elevator, they started shipping it. We've got relatives, my in-laws, some of the younger ones are married to farmers, so I've had a real opportunity to go out to Alberta and visit farms and see a lot of this stuff to see what's happening. They emphasize what I had seen at this end. They had started shipping the grain clean, where before when it would come dirty it created jobs at this end for having to clean and process the grain. Now, when you get more grain coming in that's clean to be shipped, it reduces the amount of work and jobs and employment. That was a big factor because for the farmers they were saving the costs. The evolution, I would say, going from boxcars to tank cars—those hopper tanks cars—was the biggest cost-saving factor initially for the farmers and for the grain industry.

EE: Right, reducing the amount of labour that had to be done.

GB: Yeah, because you didn't have to have half a boxcar sitting empty, you didn't have to combine. The cost to reduce it would get it in and out. The cost factor for shipping was lower. It put money back in the farmer's pocket where it was needed and deserved.

EE: I have three questions you've really been answering, I think. Do you think that the work you did contributed to Canada's success as an international grain trader?

GB: I think so.

EE: Pretty clearly, I would think.

GB: I think so because I think the attitude of Canadians at the time, going back to the '60s and '70s and the Cold War, we didn't really see the Soviets as the arch enemy as was portrayed in the American's philosophy as well as what was happening with their grain industry. We heard a lot of stories about them. Like we talked about, shipping lower quality grain, putting glass into there and stuff and bragging about it. Where they knew we had a reputation of shipping good grain. We worked hard, and we didn't care where it went as long as, I guess, they paid for it. My understanding that I guess there was a little bit of a gap at times. Part of the problem was that the Soviets didn't have all their money so they didn't always get their money back from shipping the grain or something. But yeah, I think we were all proud.

I was talking to my friend there a few years ago, and we were going back to our time in the early '70s. We had that sense of pride. We enjoyed it. We could see the grain. We knew when we loaded it on the ships that it was going over, and you'd see on television. They'd show little bits about where the grain was being received and that, and you'd get reports and letters. You'd know that where there was starvation, whether it was in Africa or the Far East or Russia or China or whatever, that we were helping. I took pride in it. More than anywhere else I miss that. That's what I missed more than anything else. But you felt that you were contributing of all the industries. At a time in my life when I didn't know what I wanted to do, that I felt I enjoyed my time there because it made me feel that I was part of helping to feed the world. You can't ask for something more moving and pride filling than being part of a system that helps to feed.

EE: Would those be the most vivid memories you had of the job?

GB: I think so. I try to allow those positive memories to outweigh and oversee the unpleasant ones. I look back at it. My wife reminds me of the unpleasant times that I would complain about coming home exhausted or frustrated or whatever, but I think at the end of the day when I go back the next day, you knew that--. I enjoyed when the ships came in because you knew that the grain

was moving out, especially the big saltwater ocean ships coming in, you knew the grain was going over there. I think that kind of got me by the bureaucracy that was changing within the structure of the elevators themselves.

[1:50:06]

EE: I know you think it's important that we preserve this history. After all, you telephoned when you heard about it! [Laughing]

GB: Yes!

EE: Want to say anything more about the importance of preserving our history in the grain trade?

GB: I think so. What I would really like to see done, and I would hope that--. When they talked about the old Pool 6 property, it has a little tender touch to me that I spent you know five years of my life there. But more so, the building that survived was what used to be the inspection office. The city has been talking about putting arts people in there or whatever. What I would like to see—spurred on by your project here that you gentleman are undertaking—is I would like to see a little museum put in there. I would like to see a large model of the harbour in there and have artists or whatever make scale models so people can see where those elevators were. Like I said, there's some before I know. If you look at the pictures, some have disappeared and people that have a greater reminder than myself going back. I can only remember from the 1950s [laughs] so to go back beyond that would be wonderful in preserving that.

To show the mills and show where we are, because we're at a time when we look at the disappearances, probably only a handful of elevators left here. With the recent mergers, when Grain Growers took over Manitoba and they merged together and now Sask Wheat Pool took it over--.

EE: Yes. Agricore United and so on.

GB: Yeah. You see the demise and the change. That's going to be lost, and I think we need to preserve that. I would hope that we can do that, and I'm hoping that the work that you're doing will encourage people to--.

EE: Certainly, orient it towards doing that.

GB: Yeah, because I know places that we visited when we were on Vancouver Island there, they've got museums and preserved heritages of their logging and mining and history, and yet we have an opportunity here that's being ignored.

EE: Well, Friends of Grain Elevators, who have been talking for a number of years, certainly have this in mind. We appreciate your support for that. Are there any questions that I should have asked that we might have on our list that we didn't?

GB: No, I've been struggling along trying to--. [Laughs] And I apologize if my mind has gone back and forth because I was trying to do it all in a chronological manner.

EE: I encouraged you to do that, so there's nothing wrong with that!

GB: [Laughs] So, every once in a while I'll forget something back. I really enjoyed the experience because it's brought me back to happy times in my life and memories that have been long forgotten. I know that there's other people out there that would probably--. There's a couple of people that I can give you their names that can bring you back into the 1950s working there that would have a little more memory of the experiences in the times before the changes. My earliest is the mid '60s, and then again leaving in '74 at the time of the changes when the pollution controls were just coming in. In some ways it's rewarding. I feel like a dinosaur. [Laughs] My ties with the people that worked there, those elevators have virtually changed very little in the previous 60 years. They have had major changes since then.

EE: They certainly have.

GB: I feel fortunate to have been part of it at the time when it was on and to see these changes and to live through them. I haven't always agreed with what's happened, but--.

EE: No, no, of course not. Do you have any memorabilia from your years in the trade?

GB: No, just a dust mask. [Laughing]

EE: Well, I was going to say, do you still have one of the masks?

GB: Yeah, the one I had got taken. I had a plastic one that somebody left in a locker, and I used it for most of the time there and it disappeared. I've got a box of the filters and the masks that a friend of mine gave me, and I've been temped to--. I hang onto it, and I use them.

EE: Well, don't throw it away! Let us know if you have to get rid of it at some point.

GB: I would love to have gotten some of the old equipment. Like I would love to have gotten the display with all the handles, the operating control from the dumper because there was seven or eight levers. The first one, once the boxcar would be spotted onto the thing there, they'd spot it one the dumper, and then you'd pull the first control, and the arms would come up and grab the end of the boxcar. Then you'd pull the next lever, and it would pull the releases out to swivel a bit. Then you would break the door and put the baffle in and sort of ease it. I got to be actually pretty good at it because a lot of the fellas would come in there and put the baffle in and tilt it and try and get it all out one end, which means they would often fill it up. In the evenings when things would slow down or there'd be a slow up, you'd be waiting for the belt, so you'd tie up a car.

Where what I did, I would tilt it back and forth and back and forth, and it was just so that I could get two nice piles and all the whole car within that bin. Then we could get the car emptied and the pins down and the empty car out and the full next one in, and the crew could have a break. Then we'd wait on the scale to be full, to give the signal to open the hopper, and then they'd let the grain through. Otherwise, the fellows that weren't doing it right would have a big pile on one side, and they couldn't get the grain out. They'd be rushing like crazy trying to finish their car and get the next one in. The fellas that I worked with I think appreciated what I was trying to do, and I tired my best to make everything enjoyable for everybody.

[1:55:40]

EE: A certain artistry in doing I gather.

GB: Yeah. I miss the ships. I miss looking out in the harbour and seeing all those ships. I miss the opportunity of going out in the fall. The worst time to be on the deck of the ships was November. I never realized until I went out to the breakwall. Because we used to see those waves just come flying over the breakwalls out there, and I didn't realize how high they were until I got out there a few years ago on a boat with a friend. It was funny, my work boots, I went and I got about one inch of sole put on there because the concrete, it used to be so cold. There was no snow. If there was no snow yet and then it was an early frost and whatever, the cement floor in the car shed or even the steel decks would come in--. Sometimes those ships would come in and they'd be covered with ice, and there wasn't a lot of snow, so you didn't really want to wear your big winter boots with the big felt liners and everything. So, I used to have work boots with about an inch of sole on there, trying to slow the freeze into my feet. Well, I think a lot of people had bad feet [laughs] from those years because the cold would just go right up into your feet. You'd feel it first whether it was the cold steel deck or the ships, concrete.

EE: It's all very interesting, Greg.

GB: Did I go over? [Laughing]

EE: We can probably talk on. No, I think we're just in the time available. So, I want to thank you for what you've told us this afternoon.

GB: It was a pleasure. I thank you both for your interest in preserving this, and for the opportunity to allow me to contribute for the little that I have.

EE: Well, you've given us a lot of vivid pictures, and they're going to be in the can as they say. [Laughing] We'll talk about other people we might interview in a moment when we shut off. Thanks again very much.

GB: Thank you.

End of Interview