

Narrator: Vern Duke (VD)

Company Affiliations: Canadian Grain Commission (CGC), Federal Grain Ltd.

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Interviewer: Bea Cherniack (BC)

Recorder: Bea Cherniack (BC)

Other Speakers: Mrs. Duke

Transcriber: Nancy Perozzo

Summary: Retired chief inspector for the Canadian Grain Commission Vern Duke discusses his long career in Canada's grain industry. He first discusses working for Federal Grain before taking exams to become a grain inspection assistant with the CGC in Winnipeg. He explains his duties cleaning samples for the inspectors, explains why grain was inspected in the country and at the terminals, and describes the process of grain grade appeals. He describes the grain transportation system from the country to port, where similarly graded grains go into larger and larger pools until they ultimately end up on a large ocean-going vessel. Duke describes his involvement in other CGC projects as he moved up the ranks, like working in the new Baie Comeau elevator, travelling with the CGC van, inspecting in Churchill, sitting on the Canada Committee on Grain Quality, and setting the standards for visual grain inspection. He discusses some of the changes to the CGC's inspection work, like the removal of Winnipeg railyard sampling, the introduction of canola inspection, and the introduction of protein testing. Other topics discussed include shifting grain export markets, Canada's reputation for quality grain, the levels of grain inspectors, some of his inspection mentors, dealing with the eastern grain system in Canada, and travelling the world with the CGC and Canadian International Grains Institute.

Keywords: Canadian Grain Commission (CGC); Grain inspection; Federal Grain Ltd.; Grain sampling; Grain dockage; Winnipeg Grain Exchange Building; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Terminal grain elevators—St. Lawrence Seaway; Grain grades; Country grain elevators; Grain storage; Grain varieties; Grain transportation—rail; Grain transportation—ships; Lakers; Ocean-going ships; Visual grain inspection; Grain export destinations; Protein testing; Canola; Canadian Wheat Board (CWB); Canada Committee on Grain Quality; Grain inspection standards; Canadian International Grains Institute (CIGI); Cargill Elevator—Baie Comeau; Churchill

Time, Speaker, Narrative

BC: December 12, 2008, I am speaking to Mr. Vern Duke.

VD: Good morning

BC: Okay, now we are going to start, so if you could tell me your connection to the grain trade. Who did you work for?

VD: I worked for the Canadian Grain Commission [CGC].

BC: How many years did your career span? How long did you work there?

VC: 35 and a half years

BC: That's a long career.

VD: Uh-huh.

BC: And how did you get started working for the Grain Commission?

VC: Well, actually, I worked for Federal Grain Company initially. I wrote exams in order to get the job with the CGC. At that time, it was called the Board of Grain Commissioners, and I was successful in the exams. But I didn't get on the job immediately because it was shortly after the war, and the veterans had the preference. But eventually I got onto the job, and I can't remember the year exactly, but it was in the middle '50s someplace. I got on as what they call a grain inspection assistant in those days, a GIA.

BC: Just going back a teeny bit, you said you worked for another grain company before?

VD: Yes, Federal Grain.

BC: And how long did you work for them?

VD: Well, first of all, I was in the grain inspection end, and then I went to the seed plant, which handled the forage seeds. I was there for about three years.

BC: And how did you get into that job?

VD: Well, actually, I was directed to the Federal Grain for a job. That was about it.

BC: Was that your first job?

VD: Well, I had many jobs when I was going to school. Yeah, one time I had three jobs at once. But I don't suppose you could do that today the way we did in those days because there was a manpower shortage with the war, you know. But I worked for Federal Grain for about three, three and a half years. And I was doing some other work in a way with Federal Grain, then I went to the seed plant. I became pretty familiar with everything required for processing for forage seed, which is like alfalfa, clover, those types of crops—peas. Gosh peas, yeah.

BC: So, we will go back to your time with what was then called the Board of Grain Commissioners and that first job that you said you started with which was an assistant.

VD: Yeah, GIA.

BC: What did you do in that job?

VD: Well, actually, what we did was prepare samples for grading. We would clean them according to the proper way to do that and pass the clean portion of the sample with the residue of a sample because they were larger than just one pound. We would pass that onto the grain inspector, and he'd do the grading.

BC: So, what kind of tools would you use doing that?

VD: Well, we had a little mill. We used to, I forget its name, a little hand mill that sifted out the larger material, and then we put them all over a sieve, which compared with, hopefully, with what they would use in terminal elevator cleaning to arrive at what they call the dockage in the grain, which is the readily removable material. That's pretty well the procedure. Some grains they allow. They have tolerances for some things that would be normally removed, but that only applied to all grains except wheat. Wheat was always required to be a clean product.

BC: Where were you located?

VD: In the Grain Exchange Building.

BC: So right downtown in Winnipeg?

VD: Yes, in the Grain Exchange building on the corner of Lombard and Rorrie, I think it was, yes.

BC: Did the grain companies, I guess they were required to bring a certain amount of samples to that--?

VD: No, no, no. What the procedure we followed in Winnipeg at the time was the grain cars moved from the country into the city, or through the city. They were stopped, and they were sampled by our sampling staff that was in the rail yards. And they would use a probe in order to get sufficient sample in order to for us to assess its quality and cleanliness in the grain inspection. And that went on 24 hours a day because grain cars moved all around the clock, of course, and all those cars, most every car, went down to Thunder Bay.

BC: That's why I was wondering why they would sample it here when I know that there were people down in Thunder Bay doing it too. So how would they separate out--. What, was it inspected twice?

VD: Well, yes. One was the--. I think the purpose—and this goes back quite a ways—I think the purpose for us doing that was to give an idea to the terminals on the quality of the grain that was coming down, and they could segregate the cars according to the elevators, and there was, of course, a variety of firms involved in the elevators—you know Man Pool, Sask Pool, Alberta Wheat Pool, National, Federal, Searle. Oh, there was quite a few. They all had their own terminals, and they would receive cars as they came in from the west that have gone through Winnipeg. They would have information on Winnipeg grading, and that would help them in that initial binning of the grade, which was an important factor because there was a time factor, you know, to have some idea of what you've got so as you can readily dispose of it in the system. And, so car lots came through Winnipeg and were divided out as they would reach Thunder Bay to the different terminals.

BC: Now, would you go down and probe the cars? What would those people be called?

VD: No.

BC: What would those people be called?

VD: No, at the terminal elevators, the cars were automatically dumped in most cases. There was a variety of ways. One was the automatic car dump and the other one was the manual method of unloading a car, but they were unloaded. As they were unloaded, they were sampled automatically in most cases, automatically by an automatic sampling system and that sample was collected and taken to the grain inspector at the elevator. Every elevator had grain inspectors of our staff. They would process the sample, similarly to what we were doing in Winnipeg. They would process them, but they would have more of a final indication of quality for the good of the elevator.

[Interruption]

BC: Carry on with another question. Who would you interact with because you were the government arm of inspection? What would your relationship be to all of these companies that you mentioned?

VD: Well, most all companies had grain inspection staff of their own at the elevator, and to backtrack if you like, because all the grain firms in Winnipeg had terminal elevators at Thunder Bay, so they had inspection staff here, and they checked all our grading in Winnipeg. The inspectors for the grain firms checked all our grading in Winnipeg, and then when it went down to Thunder Bay and it was unloaded, and sampled, and graded. And the results of grading was open for question by the grain inspection staff of the companies. They would do what they called a re-inspection if necessary. We also had a Grain Appeals Tribunal, which was a final say. It was just like the court of appeal. It was the law that samples going there to grain appeal were the final, final, absolute final.

BC: Who would be on the Grain Appeals Tribunal?

VD: They had several people. One was the chairman. He was appointed by the Canadian Grain Commission—or the Board of Grain Commissioners then—still is. He had a group of grain inspectors from the grain firms on his membership list, and he would call two of them, neither one being involved with the grain sample being processed. They would pass their judgment not knowing what it is or where it is from—not knowing anything about it, just on the quality of the grain. They made the final decision.

BC: How often would there be a dispute between the inspectors from the Board of Grain Commissioners and the company inspectors?

VD: Well, it's pretty hard to say because a lot depended on the crop quality, and it not only applied to wheat, it applied to all grains, all grains, depending on the crop year, crop quality. We generally carried at least two years' crop in the bins, starting from the country to the city and through to the terminal, so that you had two crops more or less moving and one being brand new. So

the incidence of what we call re-inspection, I don't know. I probably should know this, but I don't. I don't have any recollection of any serious re-inspection requirement within the inspection grading system, no.

BC: I guess in some ways the whole intent of the Board of Grain Commissioners was to be a hands-off kind of inspection.

VD: Quality control, that's what it was. You see, when the grain moved into the terminals--. And don't forget the Wheat Board has large influence on grain sales, so they would have to know the product that's there. And they would be selling grain according to quality and quantity, and so there was always concern on what amounts were available within the industry at the time.

The network of drawing grain from the country, you know, is complex. But it's not complex if you sort of understood what's required. For sample, the grain would come from the farm to the country elevator, and we will say it's a No. 2, and there are 30 farmers in this area. We'll just say that. And 30 farmers delivered their grain to the country elevator, and all the No. 2 that the elevator manager thought was No. 2 would be put together, none of it segregated. It's all binned together, binned according to grade. Terms of their licences required them to bin in certain ways, you know, like [No.] 1 with [No.] 1 and [No.] 2 with [No.] 2 and [No.] 3 with [No.] 3 and so on. So this gives you some idea. And then when it moves through the system, they registered it as it goes into the terminal elevator. And now we have a registered warehouse document, which tells what the quality of the grain is. Now they know the volume because that has weight, et cetera, with it, and they have the volume of the quality of grain that's there, and they can assist then in the sales.

BC: So you are telling me the network. So can you keep it coming forward?

VD: Well, once it comes from the country, it's in boxcars so that when it goes in from the farmer to the country elevator, it's binned together, all grain of the same grade. And then as it moves to the terminal, all grain of the same grade is similarly binned. Then you've got cars coming from this point, that point, that point, that point across the whole of western Canada. So they come into the elevator, and they're all binned together, so you get another combination of grain from area and then, when they ship it, they don't ship it by the car lot, they ship it by the tonne, and they ship huge volumes, you know, like 50,000 bushels, which would be nothing. They get a boatload, you know, 7 or 800,000 bushels, and it may all be one or two grades. All this grain that's in all these bins from all these cars and all these farmers, it is all combined as it leaves the elevator by grade, and the grade is in the boat and off it goes.

There's another element that comes in, too, that once it leaves Thunder Bay only in recent years, I'll say, did they bring forth sea-going vessels. But at one time it was all lake vessel, and all these lake vessels would carry their quantities and quality of grain and would get down to an eastern elevator, and that's where they would meet the ocean-going vessels. So they'd offload into the

eastern elevators. All this incidentally is licensed precisely by the GC, so they had to conform to handling, et cetera. That grain that was in those elevators might be from three boats or four boats, who knows, depending on its size and quantities. And that's all. It's not all maintained identity reserved it's [inaudible]. [No.] 2 Northern, [No.] 1 Northern, [No.] 2 Northern by itself, [No.] 1 with itself, [No.] 3 with itself, and so on, and so on. And then they issued on the strength of ocean-going vessels what you call a Canadian certificate final that carried to the destination a guarantee, guarantee to the buyer, of the grain quality that they bought. And that was a brief explanation.

BC: What would be the big terminals when the lakers went with the lake boats? Were there a number of cities down east, or was there a main place that they went to?

VD: No, no, there was a variety, actually. You got to think in terms of ocean-going because of depth, you know, through the Seaway and that sort of thing. But the main elevators--. I guess I have to watch because I lived in Baie Comeau for two years. I helped open the elevator there, you know, for licensing and that sort of thing. That's the largest grain elevator in Canada.

BC: And who were you working for then?

VD: The Grain Commission.

BC: Okay.

VD: But the grain came down in the laker, and he would off-load into places like Three Rivers, Quebec, Montreal, Baie Comeau, Three Rivers, Port Cartier. Those large facilities could accommodate ocean going vessels without problem, you know. So that's the way you go.

BC: Just to clarify then, you said you went to Baie Comeau to help open a terminal there?

VD: I was there for two years. It was at that time the newest elevator in Canada, in '64.

BC: But who owned it then?

VD: Cargill Grain.

BC: Okay, but they would have you come from the Board of Grain Commissioners to help them get that online?

VD: I don't know what you call that. But I went down there representing the Grain Commission in terms of the quality control at that elevator. In any new elevator, I presume, that the initial movement of grain in and out, roundabout requires a certain amount of guidance and understanding because that's an American elevator. It's not a Canadian elevator, Cargill Grain. The people who came up to manage the elevator, you know, they had very little knowledge of Canadian grain, so we had quite a time for awhile. We really did.

BC: So in your career which spanned, did you say, 30--?

VC: 35 years.

BC: 35 years, from the mid '50s to the mid '70s, I guess. When did you retire?

VD: No, actually, it was before '50. I wish I could remember. Gosh darn, that's terrible! I left in '84. So if you subtract from '84 you are getting down to '40 something.

BC: '49.

VD: More like 40 and a half years because with--. It was over 35. But anyway, it gives you some idea.

BC: So you would have seen a lot of changes.

VD: I was very fortunate. There wasn't too many things that I didn't experience in the grain for the Commission. They had a lot of things that promoted the understanding of grain inspection and service within the Commission. They have one thing they call the exhibit. We used to tour the country fairs and tell them what we did—show them, demonstrate. We had a display vehicle, which was very good. It went on for years you know. I did it for one year, '58, I did it. We did service to the terminal in Churchill, and we still do that service there. We have to because it's Canadian grain.

BC: When you say service, what do you mean by that?

VD: Grain inspection. Now, all this is duplicated by weighing, incidentally. They weigh it in and out and roundabout. And then I spent two years there, two seasons up there, you know. We usually go from July to November, I guess, something like that.

And then I got involved in certain projects. One was the determining of dryer-damaged grain in country positions. If they overheat the grain in the drying process, they kill the germination, and that was detrimental some way to the milling and baking process of the wheat because, you know, in the milling process they de-germ the kernels of wheat and utilize the germ because it is high in protein or vitamins or something. I forget what it is.

And then I was very deeply involved with the varietal identification of grain because all grain, well, particularly wheat and barley, you had to be able to identify variety to a certain extent in order to grade it properly. You would have to identify mixtures. So you had to distinguish this variety from that variety in order to put it into that grade. And that was very essential.

For example, in the case of wheat, we had an infiltration of US wheats into Canada which were of lower quality, and we had to distinguish those from wheat that was grown in Canada, which was licensed because of its quality for growth in Canada. And we had to distinguish the two in order to correctly grade the grain. And some of those varieties from the US, they may come in, and they might have been the nicest looking wheat you saw in your life, but they would be at the feed level as far as Canadian quality was concerned because of their inherent qualities, you know.

BC: How would you know when you look at a handful, visually?

VD: Everything is visual, everything is visual, except for weight per bushel, moisture content, and purity. Grain was evaluated for grade by a system of visual inspection.

BC: So on-the-job training someone, that's how?

VD: I went up the line, of course. Otherwise, you wouldn't be interviewed. I went up the line, and I was training officer for a few years, and one of the things we did we had varietal examinations with staff, and they'd have to distinguish these varieties in the test pattern for proficiency, grading proficiency. It's surprising, you know, but the men were good.

BC: Was it mainly men who were inspectors?

VD: In my day, yes. I don't remember. Of course, there might have been at Thunder Bay because I wasn't down there much, but the majority by far through my career is all men on the staff, very few ladies. But they came in and they got into good positions, some of them, you know.

BC: So being on the Board of Grain Commissioners, there would be a real interconnectedness with all parts this whole industry—a big network.

VD: Yes, it is really.

BC: So you would have connections with the weighing staff. What about with the railroads? Did you have contact with them?

VD: Well, no. Our yard crews, when they were grain sampling in the yards, they would have to have knowledge of trains in and out, that sort of thing, particularly, and get out of the road, you know. They would run over you. That's the only thing. There were a lot of side things that came into effect, you know, like for example contaminated grain that was shipped and discovered. We would have to direct disposal and all this sort of thing. A lot of minor, minor in the total picture, you know, but meaningful, meaningful. So yes, as far as the railroads were concerned, they came to us if they ever had a question about something on grain movement, but the Wheat Board was far more involved with railroads because they allocated cars and all that sort of thing. We weren't involved with that.

BC: Why do you think--. There was obviously a shift in that Thunder Bay used to receive most of the grain that was going out of this country, and that has changed. Why do you think happened there?

VD: That is market. That's market. The eastern, we'll call it, the Oriental, et cetera, that became the larger market than Europe, and so on. We used to do a fair amount of grain sales into Russia, but I don't know. But I have no idea what they do today. No. No. I know the people who did it, but they're all retired like I am, but I don't know what the volumes are now. But that's the main reason is because the major grain sales are to the East Coast, and a lot of the grain sales, a good portion of the grain sales now is canola. And canola seems to be travelling more east than it is west, by far.

BC: You have touched a bit upon, obviously, having the whole Board of Grain Commissioners and the whole inspection part, is that Canada had a reputation for delivering good quality, that if you bought from Canada that's why internationally we were pretty successful.

VD: Yeah, that's very true. We had the highest quality standards, and we had the quality guarantee. And the way that the grain was offered for sale came under that guarantee, and that was good assurance to the buyer. Oh, certainly, there were complaints that came forward. I know that. But they were always investigated and handled with due diligence. Is that the right word? And we had very few that ever amounted to anything. They were pretty well within the guarantee. A lot were political, in my experience. Go over to Europe in some cases, it was just that as long as we went and they could tell whoever they were involved with that they

did there as much as they could, you know, with government officials, that pacified the buyers or whatever, I don't know. That's long ago.

BC: There would have been years, I guess, when the industry very much depends on weather, where you would have lots of product and years when, I guess, there were some slim years?

VD: Well, actually, the volumes are one thing, the quality was another, and that was our major concern. We had years where grading itself was a difficult thing for a lot of the industry. Fortunately, because of our system of grain standards, and that sort of thing, it assisted very much in segregating the qualities. But the experience for handling the cause of the quality—for example, frost, and green, and immaturity, and that sort of thing—that experience was really important to the Canadian Grain Commission inspection because we were the people that called the shots and set the standards. One of my jobs. It was a long time ago, my god.

BC: If you had to pick the major changes, if you look over your whole career in the grain industry, what was the biggest change?

VD: Wow, gee. That's a good one. The biggest change?

BC: The biggest changes you saw from where you worked?

VD: Well, there was different kind of changes. The first major change that I was aware of was when they discontinued the sampling of grain in Winnipeg yards. We used to call them the yards, you know, CN [Canadian National], CP [Canadian Pacific]. And that took the crews that operated in the yards elsewhere and another system for obtaining grain samples of grain shipments prior to Lakehead arrival. That was quite a change at the time, you know, and then eventually they eliminated the sampling. What they did is they sampled the grain in the country. The country elevator operator, he sampled the grain in the country as he loaded the car and put it in a bag and put it inside the door of the car and then our staff would go and take it out and bring it up to us in the Winnipeg Grain Exchange. Well, that was eliminated also. We did away with all grain sampling as it passed through Winnipeg.

BC: What did you do at that point then when these things were shifting in your career? You would then train people to do the inspections or what--? How did that change your job?

VD: Well, really, my job wasn't really that high then. [Laughs] No, I just went along with what happened, and we emphasized more on the terminal operation, really. I'm trying to remember. We did the country samples and then. Gee, I wonder what we did? I have to give that some thought. Well, we sent people out west to Vancouver, Victoria, and Prince Rupert, and I presume we fed

some into the interior terminal elevators which were Lethbridge, Edmonton, Moosejaw, and Saskatoon. There were government elevators there. We staffed those. That's for the inward grain.

I can't remember what happened in Winnipeg, but one of the main things that was always taking place in Winnipeg was that if a farmer came to the elevator with his load, and the agent said, "I'll give you No. 3," and the farmer says, "No, that's No.2," and he says, "No, I want No.3." "No, it's No. 2." So there was a process for obtaining the sample of the shipment, the truckload, we'll call it, and the sample was sent into Winnipeg to us, to the chief grain inspector. That's the way it was always addressed, "To the chief grain inspector." We were quite busy in grading those samples for the good of the country people. And some years we'd get a huge volume because the crop grading was difficult, but in other years it was appreciably less because there wasn't that serious a damaged crop. So, that's one thing we did a fair volume with.

There was another thing that entered into it over the years. When they brought in canola—which we called rapeseed—and in order to properly grade it, evaluate it, we had to be able to distinguish wild mustard seed from rapeseed. You did that under a microscope. And so, we had to test all our people and make them not experts but sufficient expertise to distinguish one from the other for proper grading. And they did that.

And then the canola crop presented a new consideration in grading. You see, the seed itself is a little round black thing. But you can't see inside it. So in order to properly grade it because the grading requirements were quite low initially—I think it was 1.5 or 3 percent of green in the first grade, and 10 percent in the second, and then something in the third—but anyway, we had to crush it. But we had to crush it in such a way that we made a seed stick, and this seed stick had 100 little indents in it. So you stuck it in the sample, pull it out and covered it with a piece of masking tape, take the tape off, and then you had a roller, and you crushed it, and you looked at it, and you said, "That's green." And believe me, you had to be able to determine green from green, and green, and green. Or it's heated. You see, you can't distinguish heated without crushing because this black seed coat. So we would be able to determine the extent of damage and the proper grade of the seed, plus the fact that there is not too much mustard in there and that sort of thing.

So that became a bit of a challenge to all the grain inspectors. But they became very capable of handling that crop. But, initially, it was something we all were learning. We all were learning. At one time, I used to grade all the rapeseed, but it became such a volume as it is today, especially going to the west coast. That was something, then.

BC: Do you think they still use the same technology to grade things? Do you think it is still basically visual?

VD: Well, there is one element that has really made a difference in terms of quality and that is that in wheat they have included the protein content. So now they segregate wheat by grade and by protein content. And they guarantee. They're guaranteed grade, guaranteed protein content. So, we had quite a system set up on the protein. As a matter of fact, even the Wheat Board ordered grain from the country according to the projected wheat protein content of the area. Yeah, it is a very complete picture. And so, if they wanted high protein, they would take from this area. Low protein, they would take from this area.

BC: How would you know the protein content of the seed?

VD: Of a seed? Well, they tested them in our lab. And then they brought in very sophisticated equipment where they could do it electrically. They had a very--. Initially, it was by lab test. You would have to boil the--. I think, I think. I don't know. I didn't do it. But they had to boil the wheat in a quantity of oil or something and then do an extraction, and it would tell you the protein content. And then eventually they brought this machine in that could do a large volume of samples electrically. But it was very scientific because everything had to be weighed out in exact amounts, and exact proportion into this disk, and it's set into this machine. I never was really deeply involved with the protein element, although I sometimes sat on committee. No, that was near the end of my career. Even though I was involved, I didn't know much about it. I couldn't segregate even though I was on the segregating group. That's what directors do. They have jobs that they are not too brilliant on. [Laughs]

BC: Besides the changes, if you look back, what were the biggest challenges on your job?

VD: The biggest challenges? Well, outside of basic grading, I think possibly the biggest challenge was in training the people, you know, because you had to take somebody without any, in most cases, without any experience and over time giving them a program and an opportunity to learn, you know, to bring them up to the level you desire, to have a very efficient system. I think probably that might have been--. Although a lot of people never realized that, you know. But I think that was because we had a system of visual grading, of visual inspection. The whole of the grading system whether it's wheat, barley, oats, rye, flax, whatever, all visual. For example, take a crop like flax. If you had a crop of flax and you get a sample, and you look at it, and they're gorgeous little things—nice little chocolate brown seeds, and everything like that—do you know which one is heated? Well, you see, you have to have that kind of detection. You go in, eat it, and you can taste it. But those are the kinds of things that it is the skill of the inspector and what he can see.

One of the jobs I had as chief inspector was to make the standards for Canadian grain, both eastern and western, and this means that you set the level to guide the industry. The committee came and they didn't know very much. But setting standards was very much of a challenge. It really was. We did it all in the fall in order to distribute to all of the trade and commerce people around the world. So yes, we had quite a challenge all the time

BC: So as you went from your entry level job in the industry and you worked your way up. Did you also have to take courses? Did the government provide any training?

VD: No, it was all pretty well your own abilities and your competitive nature to compete for the next higher level, you know.

BC: And you would have to write an exam to move up each level also?

VD: Well, they really didn't have exams per se. They had interviews more than anything because they knew your history. For example, if I was a GIA, I would compete for a level one. They would know your history, but they would orally examine you in the way that if you were given a written paper to answer, you would give the same answer. And it was by the higher echelon, you know, like the chief and his assistants and so on. And then once you went to a Grade One, show your proficiency in grading grain, et cetera, at that level because that was really a beginning of inspection evaluation. Then you would go to Level Two. Now you were getting somewhere, because now you could grade wheat. You couldn't grade wheat as a One in those days, only oats and barley and flax and things. Then you'd grade wheat! Wow! Here we go. Then you went to Grade Three. You became a supervisor.

And then the system changed after awhile. I ended up a Seven, and then I went up higher. But seven was the maximum that I knew of. I think they had a Grade Eight in the egg industry somewhere. But I was Seven, and of course, everywhere I went I had to relate to the top people, and some of them were Sevens [inaudible]. But, no, there was never a written exam. It was just to get on the job. It was always evaluation, because in the public service, you got evaluated every year. You know on a--. What do you call it? They call that a rating, a terrible thing. I hated doing that, you know. [Laughs]

BC: I can remember my father being on the weighing side, that one of my memories of course was he went out the Banff School of Fine Arts to take some kind of course that was related to work.

VD: Yeah, yeah. I went to Banff.

BC: So what kind of courses did they give you out there?

VD: I'd be damned if I can remember. All I can remember is getting a ride home in the big van by a man who had a chicken farm, and he was expounding on the value of eggs for breakfast. And I think if anyone had disagreed with him, he would have kicked us out of his van. We had to go from Banff back to Calgary to catch the plane. My god that was funny, though. You know, we all sat there, the chief commissioner and all like this, you know, saying "Right, right. Five eggs for breakfast, right. That was so funny!"

But one of the things that, and I sort of concentrate a little bit on this because it's my forte, you might say for a long while, was varietal identification. I used to belong to a committee, Canada Committee on Grain Quality it was called. And that was where they licensed or approved for licensing or discarded all varieties of grain for production in Canada. And I saw all the wheat and barley, red spring and durum, winter and everything, and all the barley varieties at their beginning. You know, oh my god, I saw thousands of them! And I was doing it, my boss was really at that time, I don't think he was even assistant chief. I don't know what his status was. He was pretty close to him. Anyways, he was the expert, but I became, I think, that because he didn't retire, you know. I did most of the work. He was more the head of us.

BC: Who would be on that committee with you?

VD: Which committee was that?

BC: The one that was your forte, that you were so interested in?

VD: The Grain Quality? Oh, scientists, plant scientists, plant breeders. They were scientists, too, I guess. People in laboratories that evaluated grain quality. Like our own lab was a leading lab, you know. And people of industry, brewers and maltsters, and millers and people like that, and us. The chief inspector and his--.

BC: So before any grain came on stream in Canada for production--?

VD: For production or licensing, yes. At the same time, we evaluated—at least I did—I evaluated all Canadian wheat and barley, having in mind what American varieties were like, the ones that would infiltrate into Canada. So that I was able to discard anything that they were entering into early production or development that resembled an American variety. *Phew, phew*, out you go! You just can't have it!

BC: How would an American variety make its way into the Canadian--?

VD: Oh god! There's a border there that isn't really isn't very well policed, you know. And farmers try new things, and this is how they get mainly introduced. Whether that is going on today, I do not know. I've been retired too long. I think I retired in '84, in March of '84.

BC: Well, let me see what else is on this little list of questions to ask you. I guess a general question. I guess just looking back again. It's always looking back in these interviews. Your most vivid memories about your work life—like people, experiences, or stories. Like what comes to mind when I talk about highlights going back through your career?

VD: Well, I guess one of them was the pleasure I had with some of the people that were, I guess, I'd say my bosses. Like, they were awful good to me, give me opportunity. One in particular, but two, really, were the ones. There was a third one that I admired very much, but I thought he was a bit of a crazy guy. But you know it was just the people I worked for that gave me opportunity.

BC: And who were those that you feel comfortable talking about?

VD: They were all chief inspectors.

BC: And just for the history books, because I don't know who they are, can you tell me?

VD: No, there was Jim Conacher and Charlie Hammond and Matt Ainslie and Charlie Owen was my mentor for a long time in the variety end. He gave me credit on the one and only book we ever published. I oversaw its publication or printing.

BC: And what was its title?

VD: I forget. It was something to do with--. It was all grain varieties, pictures of wheat and barley.

BC: Do you have the book?

VD: No, I can't even find a copy. Do you know, that was a crime. That really was! The attitude of people when the yard people disappeared, all the books disappeared, because they had them stored there and they--. I guess. I have no idea. But once they went, they all disappeared. I don't know anyone who's got one today. Of course, I don't know anybody, anyway. [Laughs]

BC: So that was nice for you to get an acknowledgement in the book.

VD: Yeah. And Charlie, yeah. Charlie, yeah, he was quite a guy.

BC: Are there any questions that I should have asked you that I didn't think about?

VD: Well, it's hard because, you know, because it was such a long period of time and such a broad place of a thing to discuss. The--. I don't know, I can't think of anything. I don't think so hard as I am thinking. The first chief inspector--. I keep saying chief inspector I guess because I became one. It was my ambition by the way. I even wrote that out when I started.

BC: And you did it!

VD: Yeah, I wrote a poem. [Laughs] Anyway.

BC: When you were younger or older?

VD: No, right near the start. But anyway, we had a chief inspector, his name was Ludlum. That goes back a long, long way. That goes back when I started. He was a kind of a, well, he was a big man. And he was kind of a--. I didn't know him. I was young. I was very young. And then after him we had Mr. Dollery, and Dollery was a real strict man, you know, strict man. But he wasn't always strict. He showed a lot of softness, too. But he set the pattern for people like Jim Conacher who succeeded Dollery. It was quite a change when Jim came in. When Mr. Dollery was there, he was there so damn long. He regulated us in Winnipeg pretty firmly, you know, like not severely, but just firm enough that we had a lot of respect. But matter of fact, when he walked in a room, we almost came to attention, things like this, you know. But he was still because he came up the ranks too, you know. And then we got Jim, Jim Conacher. He became a very efficient and effective chief. Oh man, he set things in motion that were stagnant for years and years and years and years! All that change in the grain sampling and all that, all were Jim's.

BC: So what would be one of the changes, just as an example?

VD: Like when you removed the sampling of grain in Winnipeg. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that was really something then. All those things. But you know, it didn't impact on me very much because I was just there. We had a—in Eastern Canada—we had a requirement for grain grading, and so we can't eliminate it all together because in my job I was responsible for the eastern Canada situation, grain inspection-wise. And we had inspection offices in Chatham, a very big one, and in Toronto, Montreal, and, of course, Baie Comeau. They were for boats, but for the eastern grains, it was in Montreal, Toronto. Where all did I say? Chatham. Yes, that was about it. And it wasn't a big concern. It was mainly the eastern crops like corn and soybeans. And what else did we do? Corn and soybeans and wheat. And we had responsibility there.

As a matter of fact, we had a heck of a big ordeal with the eastern red winter wheat because they had an awful lot of moisture in the crop at harvest, and it created a mould on the wheat. This mould became detrimental to using it for baby food and things like

that. So we cancelled all deliveries just like that! Our chief commissioner went in *phewt, bang!* Just like that! And I started that. I started that. I went to the university and got an appreciation and *who!* It really did things. It was a huge multi-million-dollar suit that went forward. Well, they lost. We won. I knew we would win all the time. But I didn't know, either. I wasn't that smart. Well, anyways, so we had a lot of responsibility for the eastern situation too, and a tremendous amount of respect, yeah, for our Chatham office. They were the principal people involved with the eastern crop. And I guess they were the guidance for the eastern crop production in grading. A lot of people had a greater respect for them. And they were good men.

BC: How many grain inspectors would there have been in Canada in your career?

VD: Jeez, I can't remember. Let's see, I must have had, oh, I guess there was Rupert, Vancouver, interior elevators, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, the St. Lawrence and Chatham in particular. Oh, my god, I don't know how many.

BC: Sort of a rough estimate.

VD: Maybe about 150, maybe 200, I don't know.

BC: So that's a big workforce.

VD: It is because when you say inspectors, we are throwing in GIAs too. And that really boosts the number up. Yeah, I would say in the area of 200 or something. You could find that out, you know. You could probably find out how wrong I am. [Laughs]

BC: Do you still have the poem you wrote about going in the grain industry?

VD: No, no.

BC: Do you remember it?

VD: Oh, just a little bit. I said, "When I grow up I--." I remember this part! "When I grow up, I want to be a grain inspector, Grade Three. If I can take one step more, I'd like to be a Grade Four. And if I could go one step higher, I'd like to be a Grade Fiver," or something. And then I don't know, and then I ended saying "become Chief Grain Inspector."

BC: Oh, that's wonderful!

VD: I can't remember it. It's--. I'll probably remember it a 3:00 in the morning or something.

BC: Well, if you remember it, you can write it down and send it to me.

VD: [Laughs]

BC: It would be a good part of the history.

VD: [Laughs] To tell you the truth, I used to draw pictures of, when I worked at Federal Grain, I drew pictures of the staff that worked in our office. There was three inspectors, one was a barley peddler, and two stenographers—yeah, I guess so—and me. So I drew pictures of them all because we had a lot of idle time. The grain trade at one time ran from harvest to winter, then went *droo*. It did. The lake froze up, everything. And all the elevators filled and everything. And then you waited until the spring and things would start to move, you know. But you know it, yeah.

BC: So you are an artistic person. You--.

VD: Well, I--.

BC: You were drawing.

VD: That was a long time ago. My lord!

BC: Do you have--. One of the things, of course, we're doing the oral history of people. We are also asking people if they have any memorabilia from the time they worked that we could take pictures of or anything that's--.

VD: I really don't think so. I have no certificates or anything like that. I don't have any--.

BC: Do you have any pictures?

VD: Anything I got when I retired--. My boat's been sold, my motor's been sold. Everything was sold. And I don't have any of that stuff now.

BC: Any old pictures of when you were working?

VD: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I don't know where they are. They're someplace. But I've got them. I've got a picture of our grading in the Grain Exchange on the 11th floor. We were on the 11th floor. Everybody lined up there, grading away in the grading bench. And I've got Churchill. Where are those pictures of, I guess I got them someplace, eh?

Mrs. Duke: I have [inaudible].

VD: Oh, there we are! She's the picture lady.

BC: The question I was asking your husband was one of the things we are doing is, because we are doing the oral history, also people have pictures, whether we could make copies of them and have them go into the archives as part of the industry.

Mrs. Duke: Sure.

BC: So, if you have any that we could copy. I wouldn't take them today, but we'd stay in touch, and we would copy them and put them in.

VD: Yeah, we have some pictures, yeah.

BC: That's great!

Mrs. Duke: Quite a few.

BC: That's good. We need an archivist.

VD: I stood on the annex in the Churchill elevator. It was 2.5 million bushels at the time, and they wanted to expand it to five. So they built another series of tanks on there, and I stood on there and went up like this here as they poured the cement. Quite a [inaudible]. A massive thing. It was a massive thing [inaudible].

BC: That would be an experience.

VD: Yeah, I had a lot of experiences, yeah.

BC: Is there anyone else--? You've mentioned a Mr. Woods.

VD: Yeah, Barry Woods with Paterson.

BC: Is there anyone else that we should interview that you can think of that's around and would have good memories?

VD: Well, I don't know if you are doing anything with the Wheat Board?

BC: We're doing everything with anything to do with the grain industry, yes.

VD: God, if you ever had Frank Rowan!

BC: Well, actually, Nancy Perozzo has interviewed him.

VD: He's a great guy! But what a character, too, to talk with, you know. [Laughs] Frank and some of our--. Of course, a number of our people have passed away. I don't know how far west you're going, like out to the West Coast, or that.

BC: Well, we are just trying to gather names and--.

VD: Henry Fast would be good.

BC: And who did he work for? The Wheat Board?

VD: He was one of my assistants, and then he became chief. He followed me.

BC: And does he live in Winnipeg or the West Coast?

VD: West Coast.

BC: Well, you never know, people do travel.

VD: Yeah, that's right. Henry, I would say Henry. Yeah, he worked for me, and he stayed long enough as chief to get kind of--. Like, the fellow that followed him only stayed a couple of years, and I wouldn't recommend him anyway. But Henry would be

good. And Andy's dead, Charlie's dead, Matt's out there, but god, he's been retired for a long, long time. So Matt would be crowding. He's well in his nineties.

BC: What's his last name?

VD: Ainsley.

BC: Matt Ainsley. He's on the West Coast too?

VD: There is a young guy here. His name is--. Just a minute. Ah cripes. He's in Winnipeg too because he'd be a newer chief. You see we used to travel a lot, you know. I was almost around the world. But then these other fellows went other places. But I don't know that they accomplished--.

BC: Where did you travel in your time?

VD: I went to--. Where did I go? I went to Japan, and I went to Korea, and I went to Formosa. No, what's the proper name for that one? Oh, good god, Vern! Anyway, Korea's here, and it's there.

BC: When you went of these for your job?

VD: No, some of them were for the Canadian International Grains Institute [CIGI] because that was the teaching part of the grain industry, you know. Where did I go? I went to Japan and Korea and--.

Mrs. D: Russia.

VD: No, no, we've got to stay in the east first. Korea and where else did I go?

Mrs. D: India.

VD: I went to India.

BC: I can just identify that the other female voice on the interview is Mrs. Duke, so there's a context.

Mrs. D: Oh, and get rid of it, eh?

BC: No, no, so there's a context because we are remembering where he travelled on behalf of the--.

Mrs. D: England

VD: Oh, yeah, I can get those ones, but I can't get this other one. Excuse me. Ah, I went to Taipei, Taiwan. And then I went to England a few times, several times and then I went to Russia a couple of times, and I went to India, and I went to Morocco, and I went into France. That was funny. I got into France.

I'll tell you a story. I got into France and went into Paris. I got off the airplane. This was on a tour to different places, and I got into Paris, and the guy met me, and we went to the consulate in Paris. They sat me down and then they all disappeared, and finally the guy come back, and he says, "I have something to show you." I says, "Oh, what is that?" Our secretary, she's not too good with English, she said--. And when she got the message that you were coming, she thought they said "trains" and didn't get "grains". So they thought I was an inspector of trains, and they couldn't understand why I was there in Paris. So they mocked up something about mustard seed. I'd go around with somebody because we sold mustard into France, and they mocked up something about mustard seed, and I just, "Yeah, okay, yeah right, thanks, bye," and I went onto Morocco. But that was the funniest thing.

BC: Yes, it is.

VD: Another thing I did, I went to Morocco, and we had a problem with a thing like lentils because that was one of our areas. So I had written a statement for the Commission on something to do with the buying and selling of lentils and the guarantee on quality. And it took less than a minute to read it. So I went all the way to Morocco, got in with this crowd, and I was called up, and I spoke for a minute and sat down. That was the end of that. And people from all over the world were there, particularly the Eastern countries, because they're strong, and the Arabic countries, strong on lentils, and I did that. Oh, for god's sake!

BC: So most of your international travel was to be the face of the--.

VC: Grain Commission. I went to Italy. Yes, I went to Italy, too. I went to a few places.

BC: Well, there is a whole part of your job that I didn't even know about, and we were at the end of the interview. Then you tell me you've gone all over the world!

VD: Well, these other fellows did the same thing out of necessity. We went mainly to the eastern countries like Japan, China. We had staff going to China too, but I didn't go. I was too high in position. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, in those places, training. I guess we were lecturing on Canadian grain, and I guess we were there—it wasn't essential that we be there—but we were there or at least I felt that way to round out the programs. I mean, what the hell does it mean for us--?

Mrs. D: Don't say that!

BC: That's okay.

VD: For us to tell them about moving grain through the St. Lawrence when everything goes out the West Coast? You know things like that. Oh well, they learned it, and they had greater knowledge of Canada. Those were the days. [Laughs]

BC: That's great! Well, I can't thank you enough for this interview. I've learned a lot.

VD: Well, thank you!

BC: That's the nice part about getting to ask the questions.

VD: I don't know if I answered everything well, but anyway.

BC: No, you did. It--.

VD: That's all I did after 25 years retired.

BC: It was very good. I really, really appreciate it.

VD: Okay, now we can swear and everything!

End of interview.