

Narrator: Gunter Fischer (GF)

Company Affiliations:

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Summary: Life-long grain handler Gunter Fischer describes the variety of jobs he worked in the National (later Cargill) Elevator over his 43-year-long career. He describes his emigration from Germany, his hiring-on at the National Elevator, and his move through the various departments from boxcar shovelling to grain inspection to driving the yard locomotive. He details the other nationalities of his colleagues, the types of grain the elevator handled, and one vivid memory of an explosion in a bin of sunflower seeds. Other topics discussed include dust control, handling grievances in the union, changes to safety equipment and technology, wintertime work, work in the 18 Service Battalion, and Thunder Bay's German and immigrant communities.

Keywords: National Grain Elevator; Cargill Grain Elevator; Thunder Bay terminal grain elevators; Grain handling; Boxcar shovelling; Grain car unloading; Grain weighing; Grain inspection; Grain grading; Immigrant labour; German immigrants; United Steelworkers Union (USW); Labour organization; Labour unions; Grain elevator accidents; Grain elevator explosions; Dust control; Automation; Health and safety; 18th Service Battalion; Fort William

Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, Mr. Fischer, it's a pleasure to be here with you this afternoon, and I'm so glad that you offered to do an interview with us.
GF: Oh, yeah. No problem.
EE: We have some questions, as I said a few moments ago, and let me start by asking you to put your name on the record.
GF: Gunter Heinz Egon Fischer.

EE: And tell us your date of birth as well, I guess, is wanted.

GF: Yes. Fourth of November, 1929.

EE: Thank you. And then you can describe how you got into the grain industry.

GF: Oh, that was kind of strange, to be honest about it. My wife was still--. I was married in Germany, but I came with my father first. And I met a lady. She saw me, that I was from Germany. I made a card back to my wife in Germany. She came in May. I came in November.

EE: This was in what year?

GF: '51.

EE: 1951?

GF: '51/'52.

EE: Right, yes. And so she saw this card that you were completing to send to Germany?

GF: Yeah. And where she lived—I'm pretty sure she's not living anymore—she lived where Branch Six was before. In that corner house, she lived in before.

EE: Oh, yes. The Branch Six Legion.

GF: Yeah. No, it wasn't the Legion. It was the corner. That brick house. It was a brick--. That's where she lived. And then she knew some German and she sent it to Germany. Then she introduced me to some people, and they said--. I didn't have a job then. My dad was an upholsterer. He worked for Chesterfield House.

EE: Mmhmm. Upholsterer?

GF: Yeah. He had his own business in Germany, but here he worked for [inaudible] after. First Chesterfield House then in [inaudible]. So, then she introduced me and they said--. And the thing was that the elevator I worked, it was National Grain before it was Cargill now. They were German background. They were born here, but they were German background.

EE: The person you met or the people at--?

GF: The people she introduced me to. He was at Cargill. He was the superintendent at Cargill.

EE: Of the National Grain Elevator.

GF: National. It was National then, but that's Cargill now.

EE: I see.

GF: So they hired me, and I was never unemployed. I worked there 43 years.

EE: Yeah. So you began at, you said earlier, Boxing Day on the 1951?

GF: Yeah. Boxing Day '51 I started.

EE: And you worked at National-become-Cargill for the next 43 years?

GF: Yeah, 43 years. Yeah.

EE: Which makes it '94 then is it?

GF: Well, '92 and I believe.

EE: '92?

GF: I believe. I'm not--. I think it was '92, but I'm--.

EE: Well, that's 40 years, 40 full years.

GF: 43 years I worked.

EE: Right. And so that's how you began working in it and that's how long you worked there.

GF: Pretty well in every department. Every department.

EE: What did they put you at?

GF: The engine, I drove the engine there. The pellet mill.

EE: What did the elevator, what did it do at the time? You've mentioned a couple of things already.

GF: How do you mean? My work?

EE: Was it primarily storage and shipment of grain from the Prairies then?

GF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, the grain came from the Prairies. They had some country elevators down and out west.

EE: Did you work in the engine room at the very, near the beginning?

GF: No. No. First, I was at the--. Emptied the boxcars there. They had no dumpers then. That came later.

EE: So the boxcars would come in and the doors would have to be opened, and you'd climb in?

GF: Yeah, yeah. And then you get this, it was about a that-wide board, which had the cable on that goes up.

EE: How long did you do that? I mean in the boxcars.

GF: No, not very long.

EE: No. It was always--.

GF: Because it was--. The Germans seemed to be easier to learn English, so they took us. I got inside after a couple of months. I got an inside job already.

EE: And what did you do when you moved inside?

GF: Well, everything. Moving the spouts, on the scale I was. Moving the spouts. You know grain can go in the house bins or the cleaner bins or outside in the annex here. I pretty well worked in every department more or less. There was not even one that I didn't work.

[0:05:00]

EE: How many workmen were there at National?

GF: Oh, there was over 100. Now they've only got 30 working there now. I go there once in a while. Elevators have a Christmas party, eh? We just had it not too long ago.

EE: So the workforce of over 100, you were saying something earlier about the--.

GF: Yeah, now they've only got 30 people working, and they're not even working all the time either, eh?

EE: Were you members of the grain handlers' union from the beginning?

GF: Yes. Yes, 650.

EE: It was organized as well?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Yeah, Lodge 650 of the grain handlers.

GF: Yeah, 650. Yeah.

EE: Who was the union leader back in those days do you remember?

GF: Mazur.

EE: Mazur?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Yeah. Already in the 50s?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Because he was certainly there, what, 30 years later. [Laughs]

GF: Yeah.

EE: For a long time.

GF: Yeah. Spent a lot of time. I go there once in a while if I want something from them. We've got insurance with them still there, and I get a pension from them.

EE: Was there any kind of order to the work that you did in terms of your advancing through it? Or were the 100 men, did they take different jobs at different times?

GF: Well, yeah. But the thing is that there was a lot of Ukrainians, lots of Italians, and they didn't read. For us, it seemed a lot easier learning the English language than they did, so we got the inside jobs already, you know? Even there was guys longer than I was there, and they still were shovelling cars. And I had a nice easy job inside because it was easy to pick up the English language.

EE: Yes. Were there many Germans?

GF: There were quite a few, yeah.

EE: Do you know whether there were Germans working in other elevators or was it--?

GF: I couldn't say. It was mostly Italians. It seemed to be obvious, whoever was boss, that's how they hired. Like I says, when I started at it, there were two Germans—German descent, they were not German anymore. They hired Germans first. So when they were Ukrainian, they hired Ukrainians. That's how it worked in those days.

EE: And there were Italian and Ukrainian managers as well, were there?

GF: Yeah. Not really. They had the department to run, you know? Like I said, you had the scale. In that time, you still had to weigh by hand. It's all automatic now, but. So.

EE: When you were weighing the grain, did you do it--. Was the boxcar weighed full and empty?

GF: No.

EE: No?

GF: No.

EE: What--?

GF: On the scales. They had scales upstairs.

EE: Oh, ok.

GF: It went up there. It was elevated up there in buckets there upstairs, and then it would go on the scale. If I remember correctly, 90,000 was for wheat and oats was the lightest.

EE: Yes, it would be.

GF: Barley, I think barley was 68. And I know what oats was, but that's too long ago.

EE: I'm tempted to say, what, was wheat 60 pounds to the bushel, and barley a bit less? And oats, was it 34 pounds?

GF: Something like that. I'm not quite sure anymore.

EE: [Laughs] I'm having to remember growing up on the farm.

GF: It was too long ago.

EE: Well, it is too long ago.

GF: And I've been out of the business now for a while too. There's a difference too. Now they've got the dumpers. I think it was about three or four guys working on the dumper. One guy on the engine. They have a locomotive, eh, that they move the cars along.

EE: I think your elevator was the first one I visited. Frank took me up there, actually, Frank Mazur.

GF: Oh!

EE: And showed me that elevator. I'm not sure why he chose to take me to the Cargill Elevator as it was by this time.

GF: Oh, it was National. When I started, it was National Grain and owned by the Peavey system in the States there.

EE: Oh, it was an American company. Peavey out of Minneapolis?

GF: Yeah.

EE: I guess it is. Did you see the Peavey people very often?

GF: No, no. They came the odd time. Heffelfinger, I think was the name. They run the Peavey system in the States.

EE: I wonder, were the Germans down there by any chance as well?

GF: At Cargill?

EE: Well, no. At the--. The Peavey people in the first order--.

GF: I wouldn't know. I couldn't say.

EE: No. I suppose. Do you have any sense of the elevator system that Peavey had on the Prairies? Did they own a lot of elevators? Or did you ever see a list or a map?

[0:10:04]

GF: No. Yeah, I've seen it, but I don't remember anymore.

EE: Have you ever visited the Prairies?

GF: No.

EE: No. So it's been here in Thunder Bay?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Did you get involved with the loading of the ships at all?

GF: Yeah. Well, that's the scales, eh?

EE: You were mentioning, yeah, the scales and the spouts and so on and so forth.

GF: Yeah. You had the bins outside.

EE: The Cargill Elevator—or the National Elevator—was the main one on the Grand Trunk Pacific line, actually, was it not?

GF: I don't know.

EE: Do you know what railway line you were--? Well, Canadian National [CNR].

GF: Yeah.

EE: It would have been Canadian National by that time.

GF: Well, they own some in Quebec, too, at Three Rivers.

EE: The National did? Or you mean Cargill?

GF: No, Cargill.

EE: Cargill later on. When did Cargill take it over?

GF: Oh, Jesus.

EE: Would it be as early as the '80s?

GF: Eh? What's that?

EE: It was early as the 1980s sometime? Or was it even earlier than that?

GF: It was a little earlier than that, I think.

EE: Yeah. I guess we'll have to pull out the phonebooks and take a look to see when the name suddenly changes on it. Was there a typical day for you at work?

GF: No, not really. Once you're established--. When you first start there, you had pretty well any job. Then after a while, you establish yourself, eh? There's an opening up. They advertise opening job inside the elevator—the cleaners or spout, whatever—and if you're interested, you bid on it. If you got the seniority to get it, you got the job then.

EE: Oh, yes. So there was a seniority system?

GF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

EE: Of course, seniority would be when you first started and who had worked there longer and so on.

GF: Yeah.

EE: The jobs themselves, would you have a ranking in your own mind of what was the best job to have and which one's you'd really like to have?

GF: Oh, the inspection was the most interesting, where you inspect the grain. That's the most interesting one.

EE: And as an employee of National and Cargill later on, you could be involved in the grain inspection too?

GF: Yes, yes. I was.

EE: I see.

GF: One of my jobs there, yeah. Because we had the government staff, eh?

EE: What would your part of the grain inspection involved then?

GF: Grading it. Like I said, it comes in. Out west where they shipped it, they'd put a grade on there. Either you'd agree with it, or you don't agree with it. And if you don't agree with it, then you can either lower it or put it higher, but the guy who owned it, obviously if he doesn't agree with it—if he's not satisfied with what you did—then he can put a protest in.

EE: Right. And the company would take your reading on it?

GF: No. The government.

EE: Or the government? The government. So, what do you think the point of having the company inspectors there? Was it to some extent as a check on the government inspectors?

GF: Yeah. Like I says, if they don't agree with it--. Most times they do agree with it.

EE: Yes.

GF: So most of the time, there's no argument. But if the company is not as satisfied, either they can reject it or whatever.

EE: The company would be the owner of the wheat, wouldn't they? They would have--.

GF: No, it's all government owned.

EE: I mean the grain itself. Well, it is, of course, through the Wheat Board.

GF: Yeah.

EE: But I mean they have--. Well, that is a nice question. Exactly how the--. I guess the farmers are paid by the Wheat Board, aren't they? You're right.

GF: I imagine so. They've changed the system now, I think. It's changed now. They changed the system. I don't know whether--.

EE: Well, the Wheat Board is losing its monopoly control of wheat sales.

GF: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Yes. I guess at the end of August, it--. Well, it's the next crop year.

GF: And the thing is with barley, you have your malting grade there to make for the beer, eh?

EE: Did the elevator do a fair amount of malting business, malting barley? Or was there--?

GF: Not--. They did some, but I mean, that wasn't the main business. They have the by-products, they've got the cleaners, and they had the flax. For cleaning flax and canola.

EE: Because the elevator did handle wheat, barley, flax--.

GF: All kinds of grain. Everything.

EE: Every kind of grain?

GF: Yeah.

[0:15:01]

EE: I wonder if that was true at other elevators as well. Did all the elevators--?

GF: They all work on the same system.

EE: They weren't specialized.

GF: No.

EE: No.

GF: Well, some. They had a malting in the Port Arthur side. There's a malting. I don't know if they still do it or not.

EE: Yes. I suppose the wheat pool, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, would be able to designate what elevator now—because they own a number of them—they could specialize individual elevators with the--.

GF: Like I said, they had a percentage to get. Each elevator had how much come--. How many boxcars, how much grain comes through Thunder Bay, and they get so much a percentage of it. But I forget how much.

EE: Right. It would be divided up by the railways on the instruction from the Wheat Board, I suppose, or the companies.

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: It was quite a complex—and still is, I suppose—quite a complex system handling all of this wheat.

GF: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, the government staff is--. There's quite a few people working for the government there.

EE: Yes. Fewer perhaps in the future than in the past, but.

GF: Well, it's cutting down too, the system. They're changing now the system, anyway. I don't know how big a change they're doing, but they're in the progress of changing around now. I don't know.

EE: What kind of work that you did do you think would interest people to know about? Individual parts of the job.

GF: Oh, the thing is that I think dumping is pretty--. Driving the engine is pretty--. That's pretty nice there. Drove the engine there a time too.

EE: This is the engine room?

GF: No, they owned a locomotive to move the cars out.

EE: Oh, I see!

GF: A locomotive, yeah.

EE: A yard locomotive?

GF: Yeah.

EE: And did you have that job?

GF: I had it too.

EE: I see.

GF: I did too. Pretty well every job in the elevator I did in the years I worked there.

EE: I see. And there was always good on-the-job training, I hope?

GF: Well, like I said, there were bids out. If there was an opening for a kind of job or more jobs created, they advertised it. Then if you're interested and you had the seniority, you got the job.

EE: This must mean then that there were no specialists in the workforce. No one did the same thing for years and years and years?

GF: Well, it depends.

EE: Well, they did in a way, but they could do other things if they chose to?

GF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. But like I says, if you had a job there and there was another opening, you just, you bid for it. If you had the seniority, then you got the job, eh?

EE: Did you bid for more jobs than other people did?

GF: Oh, most likely. But that's when your seniority comes in.

EE: Yes, of course. But there were people who would, you mentioned the ones who were stuck in the boxcars for years cleaning them out, eh?

GF: Yeah. Well, the thing--. You know, like I says, it seemed to be people of German background, they learned a lot easier the English language than the Italians did. So you couldn't work inside because you had to answer the phone. Now they've got walkie-talkies and all this. The system is different.

EE: Right. Was literacy an important part of the job?

GF: What's that?

EE: Was being able to read English important to the job?

GF: Not really.

EE: But--.

GF: No, speaking is more--.

EE: Speaking is more important.

GF: No, reading was actually not the main. I mean, it didn't hurt any, but it wasn't a main--. No.

EE: No. Did workplace health and safety rules--.

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: Because I'm thinking that reading might be important in some of those areas. How did that change over the years of your working there?

GF: Jesus, I--. I can't put my finger on it to be truthful, you know?

EE: Did you ever have any explosions?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Ok.

GF: Oh, yeah. They blew up. I had the shift--. We had a fire in one of the bins. One of the bins there was a fire. I worked at the inspection until about 12:00 or so. 11:30/12:00. Then I checked the bin, and I went over there. I went over to the bin, looked in there. We had a light in there. It looked very good to me. And I just got home, she blew up, eh? Just before 12:00.

EE: And this was the first time you had seen a bin that blew up I suppose?

GF: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

EE: After that, you knew what the look meant?

[0:20:03]

GF: Well, yeah. There was--. It was sunflower seeds.

EE: Oh, yes. And what kind of appearance did it have? Was there smoke coming from it?

GF: Oh, yeah. Sure.

EE: I see.

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: Where there's smoke, there's fire, right?

GF: You're not kidding. I just got home, and I just went to bed. And then it must have been my wife or my mother—I forget who it was—she said--. I just heard, and it must have come on the radio that the elevator blew up. I said, "Jeez, I just got out of there in time!" But nobody got hurt, anyways, so that was the main thing.

EE: So much damage did it do?

GF: Oh, it blew a whole section apart.

EE: So that had to be rebuilt?

GF: It put all the siding out.

EE: Do you remember when this was? When it happened?

GF: When did it happen? I can't put my finger on it right now, to be truthful about it. It's quite a while ago anyway.

EE: Yes.

GF: But all the side blew out.

EE: Blew the--.

GF: It had the sheet metal, you know, around? That all blew out then.

EE: Sure. Right. Yes.

GF: But nobody got hurt, anyway.

EE: Well, that would be--.

GF: One guy got thrown. He must have been that much from the roof he came to land.

EE: So that was one of the exciting times!

GF: Yeah. Oh, it's that for sure. But we were never laid off. They emptied some bins out and cleaned it up. So we never were laid off.

EE: No. Do you remember what the capacity of that elevator was?

GF: Hm. Six million, I think. Six million bushels, something like that.

EE: Could be stored there?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Did Cargill add to it or is the--?

GF: No.

EE: It's still the same big elevator?

GF: Yeah. Well, they put a big shed there to put grain in it. They built that after.

EE: Additional storage?

GF: That was the storage, and they tore that down. It was just a concrete platform left. They built another dryer over there and storage thing.

EE: Right. Mmhmm. Are there other things that might interest people or surprise them about the work that you did at National?

GF: Well, it wasn't a very nice job. Dirty, eh? They had no pollution system. That came in later. They didn't have it, but now it's--. They've got the big suction systems so it's a lot cleaner now than it was in those days.

EE: Yes. So when you started in 1941--.

GF: No--.

EE: No, '51, I'm sorry. The elevator will have been presumably like the other elevators, maybe a little--. Because some of the elevators had work done on them, I think, in the late 40s because there had been that big explosion near Current River in 1945.

GF: Yeah.

EE: That was a warning. But you wouldn't know, of course, because you started six years later, whether they had done anything at the National? The next phase of work, I think, was in the 1970s when they really set to work with pollution control to control the dust.

GF: Oh, yeah. It's very clean now. I mean, it's still dust—you can't get away from it—but it's a lot cleaner than it--. Now.

EE: Yeah. And National used to do its part of spreading dust over the city, I suppose. Although, it's near the waterfront.

GF: Oh, I imagine so.

EE: Maybe it--.

GF: Especially when it was put on the boats. You know, the grain goes in the boats and all that dust! The dust, you can't get away from it.

EE: Yeah. So you were mentioning the engine, did you work on the engine then for quite a period of time?

GF: Yeah.

EE: And then an even better job came along?

GF: Well, not necessarily a better job. The job you like more to do. It's not necessarily might be not a better job, but it's something, you know? Say you work on the cleaner, and they opened the job. They needed a new guy on the engine. Well, they put the bid out, and if you're interested and you've got the seniority, you've got the job.

EE: Did you like variety in work? You liked to do different things?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Because there were some people who were--.

GF: Some. Some was easier, you know, lowering the spouts. In the olden--. Firstly, you would always move them by hand. Well, after a while, the hydraulic system did the job. You don't have to move them by hand.

[0:25:02]

EE: And that's one of the changes that you saw?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: This change from manual to hydraulic assisted?

GF: Yeah. Oh, that was a lot easier because--. But we still had to move it by hand. That was a hard job.

EE: Yes. I suppose cleaning, getting the grain out of boxcars would be hard work, and moving these spouts would be hard work. What were other jobs, the hardest kind of jobs that there were at the elevator?

GF: I would say shovelling by hand, that was the hardest job, eh?

EE: Yeah. I can well imagine. And what were the nicest jobs? I'll say nicest rather than easiest, perhaps.

GF: Well, the engine was pretty--. Because you sit down, and the engine does all the work. You don't have to--. You just have to sit on it. That was the easiest job, eh?

EE: When you went into the engine, then, someone came along to show you how to do it, I suppose?

GF: Well, the engine's not much to do. What the heck, you've got one lever and that's everything. Push, back up, go forward.

EE: I see. Yeah. You ever have any accidents with it?

GF: Oh, I imagine we had. I don't remember any, but I'm pretty sure we had accidents.

EE: Yeah. The--.

GF: Because they had--. That engine was safe--. [inaudible] or whatever it was [inaudible] it. Well, they had the remote control. And that guy, they wanted him doing a lot of other things, but then sometimes the remote control, they went out--. That engine would go by itself. [Laughs]

EE: Not into the lake--?

GF: He lost a couple of times, lost the engine. No, not in the water. There was where the rails were, where the end was, there was a kind of drop.

EE: Right. You didn't actually have it go over the drop, or did it?

GF: Eh?

EE: Did the engine actually go over that drop?

GF: No.

EE: No. I imagine there were breakers set up or whatever.

GF: Oh, there was, oh, quite a breaker.

EE: Yeah, you wouldn't want that to happen.

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: And the other end, the--.

GF: Well, it still works the same. I don't go there all the time. If I want something I go over there. Not too often anymore. But it's the same there now.

EE: So the shovelling's the worst and is the--.

GF: By hand, yes, Sure.

EE: And driving the engine is the nicest?

GF: Oh, yes. Yeah.

EE: And grain inspecting is somewhere in between?

GF: Grain inspecting, you know, you always come--. You cannot make too many mistakes there. Then, you lose it.

EE: Yes. No, you certainly wouldn't want to make mistakes. What are you most proud of from the work that you did?

GF: Oh, I liked the inspection. I like inspecting grain. I liked that job. Scales, there's not much to that.

EE: No.

GF: And after a while there, like moving those spouts, before they were moved by hydraulic system, but we had to move them by hand. That was a pretty hard job.

EE: Yes, I can well imagine. What other jobs would you have done?

GF: Well, I did work on the cleaner. Not very much.

EE: No.

GF: No, I never--. I worked on them, but not very often.

EE: Working the cleaner involved what kind of work?

GF: It was a setting, you know. You had to set them for a different type of grain.

EE: Were all the different grains put through the same cleaner, then, the same equipment?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: From--.

GF: Well, they had different cylinders.

EE: Let's say from barley to flax?

GF: Yeah, they had different cylinders there.

EE: Yes. How many speciality crops would you have handled? You mentioned sunflower seeds. I think of flax as kind of a specialty crop. Did you mention canola?

GF: Well--. Eh?

EE: Canola?

GF: Oh, yeah. Canola, yeah. Flax, canola.

EE: What else?

GF: Oh, any. Oats, barley, wheat.

EE: Yeah. I think of those as standard wheats.

GF: Durum.

EE: Or standard grains. Durum?

GF: That's what you make spaghetti from, eh?

EE: Yes. Yeah. What are you most proud of in the--? I guess I asked you that question already once. When you saw that we were doing this project, it caught your eye?

GF: Yeah. Well, it was an ad in the paper, then I phoned the lady there. They said, "What would you like to know?" "What's involved here?" So I just guess they didn't give me much information, so.

EE: No?

GF: Anything--. Oh, I said, "I don't mind. I've got time. I don't work."

EE: Right.

GF: My wife passed away seven months ago, so.

EE: Oh, leaves you even more at loose ends. Yeah, that's not easy. The work that you did was important in Canada's grain trade, wasn't it?

[0:30:06]

GF: Yes. Oh, certainly.

EE: Yes.

GF: Like we handled like--. I don't know how many elevators we've got left now. There are not that many even now, eh?

EE: The--.

GF: Not too many.

EE: The jury is out at the moment on how many we'll have left in a few days' time if Glencore from Switzerland is buying Viterra and tearing it apart apparently. [Laughs] It will--.

GF: Oh, it's all business.

EE: I wondered if Cargill was going to make a serious play for it--.

GF: I doubt it would.

EE: But apparently not. Of course, Cargill's buying Viterra would mean a reduction in competition on the Prairies, whereas this other deal, I guess, won't.

GF: Well, Cargill is a big outfit. They own a lot of stuff.

EE: Did you see changes at the elevator when Cargill took over?

GF: Not really, no.

EE: Did they keep the same managers and all or did they send some people in?

GF: They sent somebody from Quebec up here, but he didn't stay too long. He went back to Quebec, to French-speaking stuff.

EE: Oh, yes.

GF: But they didn't stay long.

EE: He may have been sent to check how well it would fit into the Cargill system, I suppose.

GF: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: So the managers, the foremen, and so on and so forth pretty well continued?

GF: Yeah. Usually all the local people. Scoop was the--. Scoop Eberts.

EE: Who--. This is one of the managers you just mentioned?

GF: Yeah.

EE: How many different managers did you have in those 40 years?

GF: How many different ones?

EE: Yes.

GF: Oh. Not that many actually. They stayed pretty long.

EE: Was the union important to you in your working?

GF: Well, see, I belonged to a union in Germany already.

EE: Oh, yes. Which union was it there?

GF: In Germany?

EE: Yes. What did you do as a union member there? What job were you in?

GF: I worked for a lumberyard in Germany.

EE: Ok. And they were organized?

GF: Yeah. Then here, after, then I joined the union here. There was a funny little guy, he's not alive anymore. Because I worked in Germany in the union, I wanted to join the union here. I approached him, and he said, "Oh, you won't be too long here anyways. You won't last." He said, "You don't have to join the union." That's what he told me! [Laughs]

EE: This wasn't the manager?

GF: No, no. One of the guys there.

EE: One of the workers?

GF: Yeah. But he was a kind of big--. He was head inspector for the company.

EE: I see.

GF: And he says, "Oh--." And he was involved with the union, and I asked him about the union. He says, "You won't be here long anyways," as soon as I told him I'd join. [Laughs]

EE: I take it he wasn't a German?

GF: No, no.

EE: Was he an Englishman? An Englishman?

GF: I don't know what nationality he was.

EE: No. Canadian.

GF: Currie. Hector Currie.

EE: Ok, Currie. Irishman! [Laughs]

GF: Could be. I don't know what nationality. I don't know what background he had.

EE: Were you involved with the union in its organization at all? Did you have any offices in Lodge 650?

GF: Yeah, I was the president in Cargill there for a while.

EE: President of the--?

GF: Union.

EE: At Cargill. How did they organize that? Were there locals in each of the elevators?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Within the Lodge 650 organization?

GF: Yeah. I think each elevator--. I think they all belonged to the union after all.

EE: I think so.

GF: And then they elected people there between themselves.

EE: Oh, yes. So you were president for a while?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Now what did that involve?

GF: Not much. Make sure that they advertised the jobs properly, and if the guys didn't agree with it, they sent somebody. It might be--. If you get the job or didn't get it. Kind of, in a sense, complaints.

EE: So, in a sense, you were policing the seniority system?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Did you have health and safety concerns as well?

GF: Yes, yeah. But they've still got them now even.

EE: Oh, yes. Of course, they're always there.

GF: We had to have every--. Once a month we had a meeting.

EE: I see.

GF: And then they bring up complaints or if accidents happen if they could be prevented, or they didn't handle it right or something, you know?

[0:35:08]

EE: The union meetings took place in the elevator or not?

GF: Yeah. Yeah

EE: Right. And so, what, the elevator would shut down for a bit of time and you'd all gather?

GF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

EE: I see. I hadn't thought of that aspect of the operation before.

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: Are there any particular health and safety concerns that you remember from your time?

GF: No, not--. Well, one guy got killed, eh?

EE: And what had happened to him?

GF: Well, they had a system in there—and I complained about that—they had on top of the floor, they had pipes going in each bin, like, you know? And they were on top, not hidden.

EE: Laying right there on the floor, right.

GF: Well, I said, “Look.” I said, “This is going to happen. If you ever trip here, you’re gone.” Well, he tripped and actually got killed. He fell between the belts there. That’s the only one I think ever got killed, one guy fell.

EE: The movement of grain by these belts in the elevators was certainly one of the dangerous parts of the operation, wasn’t it?

GF: Well, sure. They were open, eh? And we had five—I think five—going this way and three going this way.

EE: Sort of at right angles?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Two--. Yeah. You had to be careful around those. Did the clothing you had to wear change over the years?

GF: No, not really. You had to have steel toes there.

EE: From the beginning?

GF: No, not from the beginning. That came later. I don’t know what time it came in, but that came later.

EE: Ok. And hardhats came along later too?

GF: Yeah, that came later too. Now they wear all hardhats.

EE: Yes. Breathing masks?

GF: Yes.

EE: That came along at some point too?

GF: Yes. First, they had these cover ones, and then they--. Some had the real ones with a filter in them.

EE: Oh, yes. Did you as a union member push any of the company for these things?

GF: Oh, that's--. I don't know how it came about, but somehow it came about. I don't know how, why, and--. But they all had them, eh?

EE: Sure. Were you ever involved in negotiations? The negotiations, first of all, did they negotiate with all of the elevator companies at the same time?

GF: Yeah.

EE: And so there was a common table.

GF: Yeah.

EE: Were you ever at the table for--?

GF: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Usually if you're in a committee of each elevator, they usually go, eh?

EE: Sure. And did you--.

GF: They brought something up that you didn't like and stuff like that, and they brought up what they didn't like.

EE: Well, this would be before the negotiations, even, I imagine.

GF: Yeah.

EE: When the union works out what it's going to--. Do you think that some of the safety concerns—the clothing, for example—was that part of negotiations by any chance?

GF: Well, you had to have steel shoes, steel, eh? No, that was about--. And your filter system there, your mask.

EE: You don't think that it came through as a result of negotiations that the union pushed for it?

GF: I don't think so. Yeah. Well, just--. A lot of these came in a wave. A wave came about, you know?

EE: Yeah. Just something changed?

GF: Yeah.

EE: [Laughs] Yeah. I have this section, of course, a couple of questions as I said earlier.

GF: Go ahead.

EE: What major changes did you see in your job in the trade over the years?

GF: Oh, the pollution system improved there. It was not as dirty as it was in the earlier days.

EE: Dust control.

GF: In the earlier days you couldn't--. When they opened up the 15 cars in the track shed, you couldn't see anything! [Laughs] There was no pollution system or nothing. You couldn't see anything.

EE: No.

GF: But that was old. Now they've all got dumpers now and stuff like--.

EE: I was going to say that dumpers came to your elevator as well.

GF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

EE: Yeah.

GF: That's still over there. The same dumper still works.

EE: And then in the '70s the cars came in.

GF: I don't know what year it was.

EE: I'm thinking of the--.

GF: The hopper cars, yeah?

EE: The hopper cars came in. Did they have dumpers earlier already for the boxcars? Or was it--?

GF: Oh, they had some. It was mostly boxcars. The dumper came in the later stage. You got more and more and more. You very seldom see boxcars now. I think they get the odd one, but most are dumper now.

EE: Yeah. No, it is those hopper cars that they're using for sure. Have been since the '70s when Canada and--.

GF: Oh, yeah. I don't know what the year was, but it's quite a while ago anyway.

EE: Some of that was, I think, make-work projects with Sydney Steel in Nova Scotia, and so on in building these hopper cars, and it was a good thing. The railways needed them.

GF: Oh, sure. Yeah. Oh, the hopper cars, they're a great thing.

[0:40:10]

EE: Yes. Could you think of other--. Well, you mentioned the chutes and pulling them around and so on. The hydraulic systems came in.

GF: Yeah.

EE: What were the engines in the elevator like when you first started? Were they already electric?

GF: They were locomotives. No, no. They were locomotive. Same as the railways.

EE: Well, yes, for moving the cars. But the elevator itself, what was it powered by? What moved the belts, for example? Was it--?

GF: Electric.

EE: They were already electric motors?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: There weren't any steam engines in the place or diesel?

GF: No, no. No. Not ours anyway. Not where I worked, anyway.

EE: No, yours was all electric. Right. Are there other changes that you can think of?

GF: Well, the pollution improved quite a bit. That was the main change. We had not very much dust anymore.

EE: No.

GF: And everything was covered. Before the bins were all open. It's all covered now. They put roofs on them.

EE: Sure. What about four-legged creatures? Did you worry very much about vermin?

GF: No, no.

EE: You didn't have a fear?

GF: No, no. There were rats there, but you know--. Not too many mice. It's an odd place to--. When you have stuff go, put grain dust down, and you lift it up, there's some rats running around. But ours was actually not that bad.

EE: You mentioned the pellet plant early on.

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: That was one of the ways of dealing with waste or by-products from the cleaning.

GF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

EE: What--. How did that work?

GF: That worked by steam there. It had like a machine or something like a meat grinder, you know? That's how they come out.

EE: Sure. And so the cleanings, the--.

GF: Oh, that must have been a clean place.

EE: Right. But I mean in terms of the raw material for this pelletizing would be the screenings that came out of the cleaning.

GF: That's right, yeah.

EE: What was in the screenings as a rule?

GF: Oh, small seeds, the odd broken grain, but mostly dust.

EE: Yeah. Weed seeds, I suppose, and so on and so forth.

GF: Yeah.

EE: And you could sell that stuff apparently.

GF: Oh, for sure! They sold it all the time, yeah. That's to get rid of it too, same place, eh?

EE: Yeah. Who was buying the pellets?

GF: Oh, the farmers. They feed it to the cattle there.

EE: So the cows are putting through the weed seeds. [Laughs]

GF: Yeah. Oh, it's all kind of seeds. Every grain that comes in is dirty, so they come--. You've got to put it through the cleaner and it cleans the seeds out and all the broken grain.

EE: Sure. Broken kernels. These changes would obviously affect your own job, your work.

GF: Yeah.

EE: The pollution control made it cleaner.

GF: Oh, yes. Yes. It's very clean now.

EE: When you first started you--.

GF: You couldn't see anything!

EE: And you came back to the house, you'd be a dust--. Or did you clean up at the elevator before you left?

GF: No, you cleaned up there.

EE: What did they have in the clean up room? Primarily a change of clothing?

GF: Oh, showers.

EE: Oh, you did have showers?

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: I see. So you'd be clean when you headed out? [Laughs] Not be carrying stuff home.

GF: It's pretty clean now.

EE: Yes.

GF: Like I said they had over 100 people when I worked there. Now they've got not even 30.

EE: Where would the jobs chiefly have disappeared?

GF: Well, the shovelling by hand. That's the biggest.

EE: So when the hopper cars and the dumpers came in, a whole bunch of people weren't needed any longer?

GF: No, no. You need three people. But they need to--. Well, you had two guys for opening them up and the engine or the cable.

EE: Yes. What did they do at the time? Did guys leave on the basis of seniority? Those with the least seniority?

GF: What do you mean by that?

EE: Well, when they didn't need all the guys shovelling grain any longer.

GF: Well.

EE: Did they lay off a bunch of people at the time?

GF: Yeah, certainly.

EE: But low seniority people, I guess.

GF: Oh, yeah, sure.

EE: Because no one had been specialized?

GF: No.

EE: No one had just the grain shovelling job.

GF: Yeah.

EE: Did you work all year round?

GF: Yeah. I never was laid off. I worked there 43 years. Never laid off one day!

EE: What were you doing in the wintertime?

GF: We did the same thing we did in the summertime.

EE: Was grain moving?

GF: Sure.

EE: By rail?

GF: Yeah. By rail, yeah.

[0:45:03]

EE: Because the ships weren't coming in. The lakes, the bay is frozen up for four months more or less. Or at least three, three plus.

GF: Well, usually, in the Christmas holiday, like Christmas and New Years, that's when they usually had inventories to see how much grain they had left.

EE: Sure. Yes. And you'd be doing that?

GF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

EE: Did the whole workforce continue year-round?

GF: No, no. No.

EE: Oh, I see. So how many of you would be working, let's say, in February then? Half the workforce?

GF: Oh, yeah. Oh, more than half.

EE: More than half?

GF: Yeah.

EE: So the low seniority people were the ones--.

GF: But when I started there, the seniority wasn't a big deal because that's how I didn't get laid off because the management was German background, so they kept the Germans and laid the Italians off and the Ukrainians. But that's when they were a bit greedy.

EE: So it wasn't just seniority?

GF: No, not in the early--. No. Now it doesn't happen anymore now, but--.

EE: So it was their discrimination--.

GF: In '51/'52, that's how it worked because--. This was funny. I visit some guy, visit this one Italian family, and it was a bunch of Italians. The Italians stick all together pretty well, anyway, they did in those days.

EE: Probably still do.

GF: And I walk in this house, and they said, "That's the guy who took our job!" [Laughs] They're pointing at me. But he got laid off, but he worked there before I did. But he got laid off.

EE: And our countries were allies in the war and he still got the job!

GF: Yeah, that was a funny. I feared he'd kill me!

EE: Yeah, well, I think you'd head for the door! So the management remained German long enough for you to build up your seniority there?

GF: Oh, sure.

EE: Right.

GF: Like I says, I was never--. I started Boxing Day '51.

EE: In fact, on Boxing Day? It wasn't a holiday?

GF: No, it wasn't a holiday those days.

EE: I mean they worked--. Did they work through the night? Was it a 24-hour day as well?

GF: No. Not after a while, no. No, I think they only had two shifts there. 8:00 and 4:00. Not midnight in those days after.

EE: Right. 8:00 to 4:00 and the--. One day shift?

GF: Yeah.

EE: And then--. So eight hours every day?

GF: Yeah, yeah.

EE: The other 16, it was closed down. That would be one of the ways, of course, of spreading the work out if it's--. There were times when you would work more shifts then, I suppose? Say in September?

GF: What's that?

EE: When the grain is really moving, would they go to additional shifts then?

GF: Yeah. Well, usually Boxing Day, was usually that was the--. After it was--. The odd boxcar was loading after that. But no more boats came in.

EE: I mean year-round. Other times of the year, let's say in the fall, would they have evening shifts as well?

GF: Yeah.

EE: But not a midnight?

GF: No.

EE: Not midnight to 8:00. Two eight-hour shifts. Right. What challenges did you face on the job? Other than surviving Italians who had been laid off!

GF: Not--. Well, you see, like for us of German background, we learned the English language pretty quick. That was an advantage that we had, so we got already--. Because they had no walkie, it was only telephone in those days. Well, they couldn't talk, so they couldn't get an inside job. Even if they've got longer there, but they couldn't get the job because they couldn't speak English.

EE: So there were telephones scattered around the elevator, I suppose.

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: An internal system.

GF: Yeah. The telephones are still there, but they have all these walkie-talkies now.

EE: Yeah, the *Globe and Mail* had an article yesterday on the inventor of the walkie-talkie. A man named Gross in Toronto is credited with having done it in the late 1930s, actually. They used them in the Second World War or began to use them. But it took a while for them to get into elevators.

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: Were there other challenges of working in the elevators?

GF: No, not really.

EE: It was a good job?

GF: Yeah.

EE: You were quite happy to be an elevator worker?

GF: Oh, yeah. Well, I got a good job too. So I didn't shovel boxcars—maybe two, three weeks at the most—then I already got an inside job.

EE: Did you take English lessons at all?

GF: Yeah, I went to night school, three years here. In Ogden School.

EE: Oh, yes. Ogden School, right. Were there a lot of immigrants in the--?

GF: Oh, yeah. All kinds.

EE: Right. People from various countries.

GF: Yeah, all different countries.

EE: Including Italians, I suppose?

GF: Who?

EE: Including Italians?

GF: Oh, yeah. Yeah. All kinds. Ukrainian, Polish, yeah. In Ogden School.

[0:50:10]

EE: Yes. Did you do other courses as well or was that--?

GF: No.

EE: You came out of Germany with high school? Gymnasium?

GF: Well, I joined the Canadian Army, eh?

EE: Yes, you mentioned earlier.

GF: I left at 22 years there.

EE: When did you join the--? Which unit was it here? The Lake Superior Regiment?

GF: No, it was 18 Service Battalion. And I served the Lake Sups also, but mostly with the 18 Service Battalion.

EE: Do you remember when that started?

GF: Eh?

EE: When did you join them, the Battalion?

GF: I was there 22 years, so.

EE: Until your retirement, or did you--?

GF: Yeah, after--. No that was 55, was that army retirement was 55. But I got a two-year extension. I think I retired when I was 57, I think.

EE: 67, so we have 1929, you said. 67, that's '86? 1986? '66 to '86, have I got the arithmetic right? Well, someone else can double check it with pencil in hand. And you enjoyed the--? You said 22 years, didn't you, so '64.

GF: I served the 18 Service Battalion.

EE: What kind of work did you do there?

GF: I run the kitchen after. I couldn't--. I was with [inaudible] and I was trying to learn welding. Well, the guy quit, my instructor. And in 18 Service Battalion, you had to have a job. Some kind of trade.

EE: Some skill, right.

GF: To get a promotion. Lake Sups didn't need anything special, but--.

EE: Foot slaughters.

GF: But in 18 Service Battalion, you needed a job. The guy, I was trying welding, but the guy quit, so I couldn't get--. Then I got, they were looking for somebody in the kitchen, so I joined the kitchen. And I run the kitchen after for, I don't know how many years.

EE: Right. Now this is managing the kitchen or were you actually the chef?

GF: I was the chef.

EE: I see.

GF: I run the kitchen.

EE: Right.

GF: In the field or they had a kitchen at armories or out in the field. They've got in Kakabeka, they had a training area there. I don't know if they still have it or not.

EE: So does it take a lot of knowledge to run a field kitchen?

GF: Well, they've got these like big Coleman stoves, you know? Big ones there. Oh, yeah. I'd make 200 pork chops or stew.

EE: And have you done camping as well in Canada?

GF: No.

EE: With a little Coleman stove?

GF: No. Well, I did it out in Kakabeka. Still out there.

EE: But in the army?

GF: No, no.

EE: Oh, I see.

GF: Oh, yeah. Out in the field, I was a couple times at Kakabeka. I don't know, they had a training area in KakaBeka. I don't know if they still have it or not.

EE: But you were also at Kakabeka Falls, at the park there, camping with the family and so on and so forth?

GF: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. We always went there.

EE: That would be one of the ways to learn how to be a chef, the operator of the field kitchen, I suppose. Are there other things that you want to tell us about working for National/Cargill, the elevators?

GF: No. It's quite interesting. Like I said, I worked pretty well all the years. I worked pretty well in every department more or less.

EE: Yes. How often were you on strike?

GF: Oh.

EE: At least once?

GF: Yeah, yeah. Maybe twice.

EE: There was a strike, what, in the late 1960s there was a strike?

GF: Yeah, I know. Yeah, we had a strike, and then the Cadets had a camp out, then I cooked for the Cadets.

EE: While you were on strike?

GF: Yeah.

EE: Earning some money.

GF: Yeah, well you get paid. You don't get much pay.

EE: The strike pay isn't much. Maybe militia pay isn't very much either.

GF: No.

EE: No.

GF: Well, when you're working, you get the normal wages if you were assigned a certain length of time, but not just very good twice a week. Then you just got whatever. Whatever there.

EE: You were married when you came to Canada?

GF: Eh?

EE: Were you married already?

GF: Yes. I married two weeks before I came over. [Laughs]

EE: I see! Two weeks married and you left your wife--. How soon did she follow you?

[0:55:02]

GF: In May '52.

EE: From December?

GF: Yeah.

EE: And did you live in this house most of your--?

GF: We lived here since '51.

EE: I see. So this has been the family home.

GF: Main house. Our old house was on Syndicate. The house is not there. You know where that glass shop is? The tire shop there?

EE: On Syndicate?

GF: Yeah, pretty well--.

EE: Oh, yes.

GF: Our house was right there and then they tore it down. It's not there anymore.

EE: I see. Right. So then you lived--.

GF: But \$7,000 we paid for this.

EE: Right. And all of life is in here!

GF: Yes. Most of life.

EE: Well, I suppose I might ask what your most vivid memories are. Any other exciting things? You saw a bin that was going to blow up and got out before it blew up!

GF: Yeah. I went out. Five minutes after I had left, she blew!

EE: Other exciting things from--?

GF: No, that was--. Oh, I wasn't there anymore so it wasn't exciting. [Laughing] But we didn't lose anybody, so nobody got hurt. One got close, but he didn't get hurt, so that was pretty good.

EE: You did mention that the fellow got tripped into the belts and so on.

GF: Yeah, he got killed. Yeah, he tripped. That was the company's fault too. The stupid pipes. I told them that those pipes were dangerous!

EE: Did they change them afterwards?

GF: Yeah, sure. But he was dead.

EE: When someone had died.

GF: That didn't help the guy. He was gone.

EE: No. That didn't help him at all. Right.

GF: That was a stupid idea. And I told this guy. I said, "Look. What the heck? What are you trying to do here? Somebody's going to get hurt here!" "Oh, no. They won't get hurt. Sure." Two hours later, he's dead.

EE: Yeah.

GF: But I think that's the only real accident that even happened to my knowledge, of what I remember anyway.

EE: So over 40 years, that's not too bad a record, I suppose, in one way.

GF: Oh, no, I realize that. But there was no reason for that, eh?

EE: No, of course not. Even that shouldn't have happened. You're quite right. Would you say that the elevator was well-built then?

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: Because it sounds--.

GF: But see, when I first started, it was all open, the bins. Now they've covered them up. But in those days, it was pretty dirty up there because they held 22 boxcars, I think, each bin.

EE: Each bin could hold the grain of 22 boxcars?

GF: 22 boxcars, yeah.

EE: That's a lot of grain! When you say that they were open, was the top of the bin close to floor-level? Or--.

GF: No, no. They were--.

EE: Or were they towering up and open?

GF: Well, something like that. There was a space maybe not quite as high as this before the bins where the bin top was.

EE: Sure. Yes. Well, let me see. I don't suppose I have to ask you whether you think it's a good idea to do this project. You called us about taking part in it!

GF: No, it's a good idea! No, no, that's ok.

EE: So you think it's important that the people of Thunder Bay have some idea of what you and others did in the grain elevators?

GF: Yeah. Yeah. Because it was a big part of this town. Not so much anymore now, but at one time that was a pretty big part of this town, the elevator system.

EE: Yes. My memory is that when I was running for parliament back in 1984 that there were about 1,800 men working in the elevators. That's the number I remember from Frank Mazur's telling me. These days, I don't know whether there are 300.

GF: Frank was quite a guy.

EE: Yeah. Do you have memories of Frank?

GF: Oh, yeah.

EE: Any stories you'd like to tell us?

GF: Not stories because I never worked with him, but he was the head of the union then.

EE: He was indeed.

GF: And I knew his wife too.

EE: Yeah. Well, Mary's quite a force in her own right.

GF: Yeah. Yeah. She's quite a woman. Now I haven't seen her in a long time.

EE: One of the things that's intrigued that me was that Frank--.

GF: Because we had a Christmas party every year, and we always invited him and his wife to the Christmas party. Because when we run it--. We started out—after Cargill took it over—but we started out the Christmas party.

EE: At this elevator?

GF: Yeah. No, we had it in--.

EE: Right. Well, I mean for the workers, it was a National Elevator party.

GF: It was at the hotel on the--. It's not a hotel anymore.

EE: The Royal Edward? The Royal Edward?

GF: Yeah, that's where we always had it.

EE: Oh, yes. And Frank and Mary would be invited?

GF: Yeah. We invited them. And then he kept it up.

[1:00:02]

EE: One of the things that intrigues me about it is that Frank was Ukrainian and Mary's Italian, so I think to myself that must have been an interesting relationship at times!

GF: Oh, we--. Helga got to know her very well because they were all--. We invited them, so we sat always together there at the party. When we run it. Then Cargill took it over after, and they don't invite him anymore.

EE: No.

GF: Not in the union anymore.

EE: Did they move it to a different place or--?

GF: No, they always have it either--.

EE: At the hotel?

GF: Yeah. I think Holiday Inn or the Valhalla.

EE: Then it was the Holiday Inn for a while and then you had to move down the road.

GF: Yeah.

EE: Ok, well I think--. Owen, do you have any questions, Owen, that had come to your mind as you've been listening?

OM: Well, not too many, but I was interested in how you decided to come to Fort William.

GF: My wife's sister lived here. She married a guy from Czechoslovakia, and they couldn't immigrate to Canada before they took the Germans. I think about three or four months before the Germans could come here. But she was married to a Czechoslovakian.

EE: Czech or Slovak, do you remember?

GF: No.

EE: Because they are two countries. Well, they are literally two countries now.

GF: Yeah. No, I couldn't say.

EE: The Slovaks, there have been a lot of Slovaks in Thunder Bay over the years. Of course, the community at St. Peter's Church has been Slovak.

GF: Well, this guy he was represented the president of the painter's union, this guy.

EE: He was the president of it?

GF: Yeah, the painter's union.

OM: So you left Germany in '51?

GF: November '51.

OM: And you came over by boat?

GF: Yeah.

OM: And landed in the East Coast?

GF: Halifax.

OM: Halifax. Took the train across the country?

GF: Yeah.

OM: What were your first impressions of Canada?

GF: Well, Canada is strange because, like, New Year's Day is a big day in Germany. Christmas is quiet time, eh? But New Year's Eve is--. So it was the first New Year. In Germany, they go nuts on New Year's Eve. I went out here, there wasn't a peep out here! [Laughs] There was not a thing!

EE: It was wintertime! [Laughing]

GF: There was nothing happening here! I said that was strange.

OM: And how long were you here, then, before you started to work?

GF: Oh, not too long. The 26th of December, Boxing Day, I started '51.

OM: Ok. At the elevator.

EE: Maybe, what, three weeks or so? Or it would be about a month, I guess. Late November to--.

OM: And did--.

GF: My--.

OM: Oh, sorry go ahead.

GF: No, go ahead.

OM: And did somebody suggest you apply at the elevator?

GF: Yeah. Well, like I said, I went to the post office and made a card. My wife was still in Germany, made a card in there. There was a lady there—oh, I'm pretty sure she's not alive anymore—she saw me send this to Germany. And she was not German, but she had German friends. She lived in that corner house beside Branch Six there. They lived there. And she said, "Why don't you come and visit me?" When I went over, there was this guy, a German guy. He was running the boiler at Cargill. So then he said, "Why don't you come over to the elevator and see?" Scoop Eberts was running the elevator in those days, and Sybil was the superintendent. And Scoop Eberts was running the elevator. Well, he got me the right job right away, so I got a job. The Italians got laid off, and I got the job. I wasn't a very popular guy! [Laughs]

OM: And how did you end up joining the armed forces?

GF: I was trying to get a trade there. That's what I get over there. The 18 Service Battalion, you had to have a trade to get promoted. So I was interested in welding. That guy quit, so I still didn't have a job. Then there was an opening in the kitchen, so I joined the kitchen, and then I ran the kitchen.

EE: So, you applied heat to food rather than heat to steel!

GF: Yeah.

EE: So you wanted to be a welder?

GF: Yeah, but the guy quit, eh? And the thing is that to get a promotion in those days in the 18 Service Battalion, you had to have a trade, otherwise you couldn't get promoted.

EE: And you reached, did you say, Warrant Officer?

GF: Eh?

EE: Did you say you reached the rank of Warrant Officer?

GF: Warrant Officer, yeah.

OM: You may have cooked for me because I was in the summer reserves in 1964, and we were out at Kakabeka for a bit.

[1:05:06]

GF: Yeah? Oh, a lot of times they were out at Shebandowan too.

OM: Ok. I was out at Kakabeka.

GF: Yeah.

OM: But the other thing I wanted to add isn't a question, but my father was a grain inspector for the government, and he worked until 1974. I'm not sure if--. He may have spent some time at the National. He spent a lot of time with Searle, Searle Elevator.

GF: Oh, that's just across the street.

OM: Just down the street from you there.

GF: Yeah.

OM: But he liked the grain inspection too.

GF: Oh, yeah. Well, it's a good job.

OM: Yeah.

EE: Did he have any comment on the relationship between government inspectors and the company's inspectors?

OM: My sense was that they always got along. You know, he always felt they were all trying to do the same job.

GF: Yeah. Oh, yeah. We had no problems with them. Because I worked quite a bit at inspection. I had to work with a few people there, so I had never problems there.

OM: He always had more problems with his bosses! [Laughs]

EE: I find myself wondering whether the company's inspectors were a holdover from before the Wheat Board.

GF: Well, they were all--. In those days when I started, all the inspectors—government inspectors—were all veterans. All of them in those days.

OM: Yes. My dad was a veteran.

GF: I know, they'd be all. When I started in '51/'52, all the government inspectors, they were all veterans. Not anymore, but in those days.

OM: A lot of my dad's friends were all inspectors. Where--.

GF: Oh, I know, they all were.

OM: Some in--. Yeah, that's right. Navy, Air Force, Army.

GF: Yeah, they were always. They all were veterans.

OM: Yeah.

GF: All who worked for the government. They were all veterans.

EE: The reason I'm musing over this is that there was a time when the company would have owned the grain. And then getting the right grade for it would be important because they would have bought it from farmers, and they would want to be sure that they didn't pay more than they had to for what they were buying. But it would seem to me that from 1935 or so onwards, once the Wheat Board took over, if the Wheat Board was buying the wheat and the other--. Well, maybe it didn't buy all the grains—that would be one of the issues—but if it was buying the wheat, what's the point of having company inspectors? But they may just have kept them on--.

OM: Checks and balances.

EE: As a kind of checks and balances system.

GF: I don't know what the reason was for the--. The government staff is still there.

EE: Of course.

GF: They're still there. I think they're reduced, their capacity and what they can do, but they're still there.

EE: And Cargill has its own inspector still working too?

GF: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

EE: Now, of course, they're going to be owning the grain now, so their inspectors--. And that could be it's just a matter of being prepared for any change that took place.

OM: I have one more question.

EE: By all means.

OM: So, what were some of the names of the German families that you worked with at the elevators? We're trying to get a sense of who people worked with when they were at the elevators. So.

GF: How do you mean?

OM: What were some of the German people you worked with at the elevators? What were their names? Do you remember?

GF: Oh. Yeah. Eberts.

EE: Do you want to spell that? This was the manager as well, Eberts. E-B-E--?

GF: Scoop, yeah, Eberts. E-B-E-R-T-S.

EE: E-R-T-S. Ok. Eberts, right.

GF: Scoop. He lived in that house, same block, couple blocks down on a corner. That big house there with the big yard. That's where--. They've got the lion's head. That's where Scoop lived.

EE: I see.

GF: And then after he lived in Waverly Towers.

EE: Right. What were some of the others? As Owen was saying, do you remember the surnames of other workers, your colleagues?

GF: Yeah. What the heck? Dietrich, he worked for Abitibi in Port Arthur.

EE: You mean he went to the paper mill?

GF: Yeah. And my wife's hospice when she was still alive.

OM: Did you belong to the German Association in town?

GF: I did, but quite a while ago.

EE: This is the one over in the East End there?

GF: Yeah. That's it. The hall is still there. It was a kindergarten after, but it's not now.

EE: Sure. The German Club.

GF: Yeah.

OM: And did you ever run into a chap by the name of Ralph Schneiders by any chance?

GF: Who?

OM: Ralph Schneiders? He owned that little elevator down by the river.

GF: Oh, no.

OM: Just down the street on Vickers Street.

GF: Yeah.

OM: He bought it.

GF: Oh, yeah. Oh, I'm pretty sure I knew him because that at Vickers, Cargill owned that elevator too.

[1:10:03]

OM: Ok.

GF: They owned that elevator too. That was a special one for--. They had special stuff for oats for the racehorses.

OM: That's right. Yes.

GF: Oh, no. I've worked there too. I've been there.

EE: Oh, you were sent to work there?

GF: Yeah, I worked there. Not all the time, but--.

EE: Because it was part of the Cargill? Or was it National earlier?

GF: Yeah, yeah. National earlier.

EE: I see.

OM: But he had purchased it after, so he owned it himself.

EE: Right.

OM: Actually, that's the--.

GF: They were specialized in oats for the horses.

OM: That's unique, isn't it?

GF: Yeah.

EE: This was grain going to southern Ontario for racehorses?

OM: It was sent all over.

GF: No, no, they sent it overseas.

EE: Oh, really?

GF: Out to--.

EE: Thoroughbreds in England and wherever?

GF: No, not in England.

EE: Or in Kentucky?

GF: I forget what it's called now. I can't think of the name right now, but they had special oats just for racehorses.

OM: Did they go to the States too? United States? Some of their--.

GF: Could be. I don't know where. I worked there part time. But then, it's so long ago you forget, eh?

EE: It's a challenge to remember.

OM: Ok, Ernie. I'll turn it back to your well and capable hands.

EE: Right. Well thank you very much, Owen. I appreciate your confidence. I appreciate your giving us some time, Mr. Fischer.

GF: Oh, that's no problem. That's no problem.

EE: In telling us about your work in the elevators.

GF: Yeah. Well, I worked there 43 years and I pretty well worked in every department there.

EE: Yes. That's quite the record!

GF: From the dumper to engine, pellet mill.

EE: Did you carry and souvenirs away from it?

GF: How do you mean souvenirs?

EE: Other than wounds on the body! I was thinking artifacts, pictures, anything of that sort?

GF: No. I'll see what I've got upstairs.

EE: Well--.

GF: No, I can have a look.

EE: Well, we'll wrap it up here then, so Owen can turn that.

GF: Yes, if you stay here, just let me get by.

OM: Thank you. Thank you very much.

EE: Thank you so very much.

GF: Well, I'll be right back.

EE: Ok.

GF: Be only a minute.

End of Interview.