Narrator: Clarence Johnson (CJ)

Company Affiliations: C. A. Johnson Electric Ltd., Peterson Electric Ltd., Mahon Electric Ltd.

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Interviewer: Ernie Epp (EE)

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Summary: Electrician Clarence Allan "Swede" Johnson discusses the development and growth of his electrical business (C. A. Johnson Electric) and its eventual interaction with the Thunder Bay grain elevators doing electrical installations and upgrades. Johnson describes his early connection to the local grain industry through the explosion at Saskatchewan Wheat Pool 4B and Christmastime contract work "banjoing" the grain silos. He details the impact of the explosion on the Current River community, which he got to know well through a boyhood paper route. Other topics discussed include early work in natural gas furnace installations, the occasionally precarious conditions of electrical work, details of his growing workforce, provincial union negotiations, his business's glowing safety record, and relationships with the bank.

Keywords: C. A. Johnson Electric Ltd.; Electrical work; Port Arthur; Current River; Skilled trades; Trades work; Grain elevator explosions; Pool 4B explosion; Dust control; Grain elevator repair; Grain elevator upgrading; Saskatchewan Wheat Pool 7; Parrish & Heimbecker Elevator (P&H); International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW); Labour unions; Labour organization; Health and safety; Thunder Bay industry

Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, it's a pleasure to be here with you this afternoon, and I suppose we should probably deal with names right off because, of course, you have a given which I'd ask you to give us, but you're also well known by some other handle. So why don't you put that on the record first, your given name. CJ: Well, my given name is Clarence Allan Johnson, and that's where the company name C. A. Johnson Electric came from, the C. A. And when I was six years old and a paper boy because my parents were immigrants from Sweden, for some reason I got called "Swede" and it stuck right through public school, high school, and right up to the current time.

EE: And that's how I've come to know you as well and ask you what your given name was this afternoon. Could you put on the record as well where you were born and the date of your birth, and then we'll get into the interview.

CJ: I was born on July the 9th in the General Hospital. And at that time, we lived on Machar Avenue.

EE: General Hospital here in Port Arthur?

CJ: Correct.

EE: Right. Well, the questionnaire that we're working from is oriented towards people who have actually worked in the grain industry, the movement of grain and so on and so forth. Perhaps what I should ask you is how you became an electrician and then an electrical contractor. If you could sketch something of your life, then we'll work towards how that related to the grain trade, what kind of work you did there.

CJ: Well, when I went--. Came from Current River, Claude Garton School in Current River, I went to Port Arthur Technical High School. In Grade 10, I decided I wanted to major in electricity. I kind of enjoyed the trade, and that's how it came to pass. When I graduated in 1952 in June, I went to work for Eric Peterson of Peterson Electric, and I spent seven years there—as an apprentice for four and as a journeyman for three. Then I decided I would I try it on my own, and I wrote my master's license and achieved it, and seven years to the day almost, I started my own business.

EE: And this would have been in 19--?

CJ: That would have been 1959.

EE: 1959.

CJ: June 1959.

EE: In the midst of a bit of economic slowdown at the time, or did that apply here at the Lakehead?

CJ: Well, I started out with just doing houses and having no working capital. Having saved up $800 and nobody knew me as a contractor, I went from--. Every time somebody dug a hole, I went over and asked them if I could bid. Some people said, "I don't

know you. Forget it." Others said, "By all means." And I started out like that, and within a couple of years I had about four people working. And then gas hit Thunder Bay.

EE: Now, that's quite a story too, I guess.

CJ: When gas hit Thunder Bay, gas is the electrical competitor, but it was my best friend because they would go up, like, College Street and go up the back lane, and there would be maybe ten houses on each side of the lane. And maybe five or six on each side would probably take gas and throw out their coal furnaces, oil burners, whatever they had. I think we had as high as five people wiring gas furnaces and doing as many as 50 and 55 a day.

EE: Wow. And this is natural gas of course, where the--.

CJ: Natural gas, right.

EE: The pipeline came through from the west.

CJ: Yes, and they were running them down the back lanes.

EE: Right. That must have been quite a little period of reorganization of things. Very definitely in back lanes. A lot of reorganizing of things very briefly, but wow. A lot of scrap? A lot of old furnaces and whatnot?

CJ: Right. And I was very fortunate because we wound up doing all Sears' work. We had all Eaton's work. We had Keenan Sheet Metal. We had MacEwen Oil. We had Supercraft Heating. We had just about every sheet metal outfit that installed the units. We almost did all of them in Thunder Bay. I won't say all, but I bet we did 60-65 percent.

EE: It sounds as if you just vaulted over the other contractors in town and became the biggest contractor through this?

CJ: I don't know. I just had connections. I just seemed to mix the guys that were in the industry and got to know them personally and gave them good service. And those were the days when you didn't even make out a bill. You made out a bill if you'd, say, like 10 Decker Street, and the bill would be $12 to wire the furnace. There'd be no itemized hours, no itemized material. It was a flat rate. Some you took a bit of a beating on, others you did all right, some you did exceptionally well. And then every year, of course, they went up a dollar or two as time went by and inflation took over.

[0:05:15]

EE: Right. So this was all residential work, and was that pretty well the business for a time?

CJ: Well, that was the business for probably the first five, six years, and then we kind of got into apartments and old-ages homes. We did quite a few old age homes. Large old-age homes.

EE: Still residential in its way, but it's still kind of semi-commercial, I guess.

CJ: Right. And then we slowly graduated into commercial, and we got into lots of schools. New schools, remodeling old schools, doing new service stations. Considerable out of town work from Fort Frances, Atikokan, Kenora, Red Lake, Wawa, even Sudbury.

EE: Was yours the largest electrical contracting firm in town?

CJ: No, I think there was, at the time, there was about four of us that were more or less did everything in Thunder Bay, with the exception of very small work for other organizations or other contractors that had maybe two or three men working for them.

EE: Who were your competitors? The other firms?

CJ: At that time, it would have been Strachan-Aiken and still Eric Peterson—who I had learned my trade through—and Mahon Electric, and myself.

EE: So you were the--.

CJ: Oh, and Sylvester Electric was in business then too.

EE: Yes. The only firms left from those now--. Is Mahon Electric still in it?

CJ: Uh, no. They're out of it.

EE: No?

CJ: No. The only one--. Strahan Aiken's gone, Johnson Electric's gone, Sylvester's gone.

EE: You've retired? Or are you still--?

CJ: I retired. No, we're right out of it, other than I still have the corporation, which only does my own work for the rental buildings.

EE: Sure, right. When did you first do something that was related to the grain trade?

CJ: The grain trade, I started [laughs] I guess back in--. I've got a couple notes here. I started back--. My first relationship to the grain trade was when Pool 4B blew up.

EE: In 19--?

CJ: In Current River.

EE: Right. 19--.

CJ: I think that was a Sask Wheat Pool, and it blew up in Current River. There was approximately 85 people, of which the majority were from Current River, that got killed in that explosion. [Note: 23 people killed]

EE: Right. Now this is what, the late 60s?

CJ: This was in about '45/'46. I was very young.

EE: Ok. Your first experience. All right. It's August '45.

CJ: I'm still in high school.

EE: Right. It blew up the day sort of within 24 hours of the first atomic bomb being dropped. I've viewed the papers for it. I can tell you that's when it happened. August 1945.

CJ: Oh, ok. That I didn't realize. Ok.

EE: Ok, so you say 85 of--.

CJ: It was around ’45/’46.

EE: August ’45.

CJ: Ok. I got hired on because I was in the electrical in high school at Grade 10. I got hired on by--. Sorry. I got hired on by Mahon Electric to be a stock boy down at where they were rebuilding the elevator, at Pool 4B.

EE: And how long were you employed there at the time?

CJ: I was there about three months over the summer holidays.

EE: I see. Right. So this was the first experience. The elevator wasn’t working, obviously, after the--. How badly was it damaged?

CJ: Actually, this was—when I started there—it was probably a year or a year and a half after before they got underway and started rebuilding it.

EE: Ok. So it could be ’46 then. It blew up in ’45.

CJ: Right. So this would have been around ’46/’47.

EE: This is your memory, then, of the summer of ’46 perhaps?

CJ: Yeah. Commonwealth Construction was building it and Mahon Electric was a subcontractor that were doing the wiring for the--. Well, a lot of it was brand new and some of it they were able to salvage of the old building.

EE: Now do you have a memory of what was involved in the reconstruction? Whether changes were made from what it had been like before the explosion?

CJ: Well, I was pretty young, but of course they would have been modernizing with all the latest in technology and everything for handling the grain.

EE: And dust control, did you have a sense of that?

CJ: And dust control. Considerable dust control because that was what caused the original explosion that killed all those fellows.

EE: I might mention that we interviewed V. B. Cook, and he was an engineering student at this time and wrote on dust and the danger of dust.

[0:10:08]

CJ: Right.

EE: Of course, the US and around the world, it's in mines first of all, but elevators of course produce similar dust problems. He had a paper from the University of Toronto engineering faculty.

CJ: Oh, I see.

EE: And here you are as a high school student, of course, coming to grips with the--. Or helping those who were trying to deal with the problem. So what more do you remember from the time, that experience?

CJ: Well, the day it blew up was amazing because I was coming down on a—I was about 14—I was coming down the hill on a bicycle, and I just hit the top of the Current River hill there where the Jolly Roger Hotel used to be when it blew up. So I got a firsthand sight of this huge billow of smoke and fire and everything. And I took my bicycle, and I bicycled right down there. Of course, we could only get so close, and the firemen arrived.

EE: I'm trying to remember, position myself from there. Across the trees there between the street and—in Current River—the dam, and so you'd be looking through the trees or over them to where the thing had blown up.

CJ: Well, I was right on top of the hill, so you had a pretty good view. Yeah.

EE: Yes. Wow.

CJ: It was quite a sight.

EE: Yeah. Quite a noise I expect.

CJ: I was a paper boy at that time or earlier, so I knew all those fellows that--. I knew most of them that got killed in that thing. I knew them and I knew their families because I grew up in Current River. And it was certainly a tremendous tragedy.

EE: Yes. Yes, it certainly was. Because the deaths ran to, what--?

CJ: I think it was in the eighties.

EE: Ok.

CJ: 80-85 people, I think, died.

EE: Did this whole experience have any impact on your own choice of occupation later?

CJ: Not really. It was amazing because I wound up becoming a stock boy down there for Mahon Electric on that same elevator probably about two years after it blew up, and I spent the summer there working for them. And of course, I was liking the trade and definitely decided to stay with it. I major--.

EE: So you said Grade 10.

CJ:Bill Astell [sp?] for a great teacher in Grade 10.

EE: Oh, yes. 1932, you'd be 18 or 19. Fifty then. So this is about age 15-16. This is very close to the time that you made your decision to pursue the trade.

CJ: Yes. Right, right. It helped.

EE: I daresay it would have. So from that experience then, probably summer of '47, did you have any experience or any contact with the grain trade? Other than the dust in the air, of course, which continued through these years! [Laughs] Any experience with the grain trade directly?

CJ: Well, we did a fair amount of work in the elevators.

EE: When would that have begun?

CJ: That would have probably been in--. Probably would have been about in the late ‘60s, early ‘70s. We did some major work on some of the elevators at Intercity. And I think we worked in about three of them that we did. I’m trying to recall exact names. I think we were in Pool 7.

EE: Right.

CJ: We ran lots of huge cables and put a new distribution system in.

EE: Ok. Let’s take one of those elevators, if it’s Pool 7 then. What kind of work were you contracted to do? What was the end result going to be?

CJ: We were mostly running—at that time—we were mostly running brand new electrical feeders to all the explosion-proof panels and everything.

EE: So this was in support of panels going in that would not produce sparks, I guess, then or be explosion proof.

CJ: Right. Correct. Then on a couple of the other elevators we were doing a lot of smaller contracts. They needed $50,000 worth of work done. That was too much for their own people to handle. We got called a fair amount to do that type of work.

EE: We’ve had interviews with three men, one of whom—someone like yourself—as a young fellow was involved in the late ‘40s and kind of coming to grips with the dust control problem, I think, for the first time. Then we interviewed someone else who did work in support of this kind of work maybe 20 years later. And then we interviewed a third person who has been involved much more recently as a sheet metal worker with the change of the machinery. So if this is taking place around 1970, did you have a sense then that there was an upgrading of dust control going on, that pollution control was more of a factor for the companies?

[0:15:24]

CJ: Well, I think at that time after they’d had that major explosion, I guess they were getting a little tougher on the grain industry and sitting on top of them for the safety of the men and staff that worked there. Regulations got tougher and tougher to get dust control. So there was a certain amount of fair-sized jobs done in the elevator, which entailed mainly electrical.

EE: Yes, I see. Yeah, the machinery would be operated by electric motors, I suppose.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: Were you faced with particular kinds of codes or regulations on how to install this equipment?

CJ: Well, there's a large section in the code book, and you have to get very familiar with it, and your staff had to get very familiar with it. And of course, then you had electrical inspections, which I think they took extra care to inspect those very carefully, so that if anything did happen that somebody wasn't brought to task because they didn't do their job properly, whether it was the contractor, the hydro inspector just who--. So things were done pretty good at that time after.

EE: And this was detailed bidding by now, I suppose. Contracts of some lengths.

CJ: Well, I've been out of it 14 years now, so I don't know.

EE: Well, I'm thinking back to those years you'd be--.

CJ: Yeah, and then after that, of course, then the grain industry started to slip in, I guess, what was that I guess in the '90s? Early '90s?

EE: I think as early as the mid-'80s it began to slow down.

CJ: Mid-80s. Yeah, started slowing down considerably.

EE: Yeah. But there was a 15-year period—maybe from '68 or '69 to '83 or '84—when things were pretty lively. How many men were you employing? Mostly male, I suppose.

CJ: Oh, in total, I guess we got up to a maximum of about 55 for one or two years, but normally we had a regular staff that ran anywhere from, oh, anywhere from about 22-24 to about 35.

EE: Right. These were including your office staff as well? Where, I suppose, you--.

CJ: Well, you'd have to add about another five for that.

EE: Women were there, but the people out in the--. Your electricians were all male, I suppose?

CJ: Uh, no. We had a couple females that--.

EE: Did you?

CJ: Yeah. It didn't work out for the best, but we tried. There was certain chauvinism out there, no two ways about it. And she could handle herself as well as anybody amongst the men right down to the language, but I think it just got a little rough. And out of town was a problem. Now your costs would double if you were to send a girl out of town because now you've got to rent two rooms instead of one, and then you've got to have--. You're going to have trouble with wives worrying about their husbands, and husbands worrying about their wife if she's married. This one happened to be single. So, yeah, we were probably one of the first if not the first to hire a female apprentice.

EE: And how long did she last then? Did she finish the apprenticeship?

CJ: No. I guess she was with us about--. I don't think much more than about a year. I know she was working when we did Murillo School. She was working out there, and when they did the Centennial Building for Tom Jones over at Fort William there on Victoria Avenue. She was working there as well.

EE: Did she become an electrician?

CJ: Oh, she was competent. She was very good.

EE: I mean did she continue in the trade is I guess what I'm asking.

CJ: I kind of lost track, so I really don't know.

EE: Sure. Right. Would this have been, what, in the early '80s or late '70s? Because I get the sense from some other interviews we've done that it was then that maybe the federal government was encouraging employment equity. We began calling it that in the '80s.

CJ: I think it was the mid-'80s. Around the mid-'80s, I believe.

EE: I see. Right. Ok. So when you took on Pool 7—I say let's go back to that—how much of your workforce would be in there?

CJ: Oh, we'd have probably about six. Six, seven, that's about all.

EE: And they were there for weeks? Now this would be, what, in the wintertime when the work would slow down?

CJ: That would have been winter and summer. We were there--. We had a fairly--. At that time, we had about a half-million-dollar job, so we were there for, I don't know. We were there for probably eight or nine months.

[0:20:05]

EE: I see. And how difficult is it to do the work while the elevator is operating?

CJ: Well, the only trouble we had, a lot of it was very high. We were working in some places 70, 80, 90 feet in the air, and that created a bit of a problem trying to work at that height and building scaffolds and everything.

EE: I can well imagine!

CJ: And handling huge cables. Like heavy, heavy cables.

EE: Yeah. How big were the cables?

CJ: Oh, we had up to, I guess, four conductor 250-MCM, which is like that.

EE: Right. What you were just indicating something like I'm wanting to say four inches across, but what should we say? Something like ten centimetres?

CJ: No, it would be about two and a half, three-inch diameter cables and down to an inch, inch and a quarter.

EE: Of course. But that's quite a cable to be pulling up.

CJ: And then we had to put racks up and they had to be strapped every eight or nine feet. They had to be strapped across the bottom of the upper part of the elevator.

EE: Not everyone's happy working up there, I don't suppose.

CJ: Well, you had a mixture of men, and some men fear height, others it doesn't bother them at all. You know? Of course, you take fellows that, if they didn't want to work in heights, we had fellows that didn't mind it at all. And we did that on a lot of other projects as well. Up in the ore dock in Fort William and different jobs like that that they had to work at considerable height. A lot of them—I won't say they're fearless—but a lot of them, the height doesn't bother them.

EE: [Laughs] They did seem almost fearless when they were up there!

CJ: You learn that early in the trade that you've got to work on heights. [Laughing]

EE: You yourself were quite happy--.

CJ: Well, I worked on the ore dock when I was with Peterson, and I remember they had a trolley line—kind of a trolley line—for the ore cars, and we had to put poles up. The poles weren't very high. They were only about 30 feet, but they were right on the edge of the dock on both sides, and we had to string wire between across the dock every 150 feet or 180 feet. Then they were supported on the outside by like 6x6s, and we had to climb the poles. Then when you went to tie the wires in, you had to have a belt around you, of course, and spurs, and you were about 80 feet or 70 feet above the ore dock trestle, which was about 180 or 200 feet in the air. So now you're suspended with your back to the water. So now you are not only 40-50 feet up, but you're also another 180-200 feet to the water. So I remember kind of shaking that time. [Laughing]

EE: The first time particularly.

CJ: Yes!

EE: I remember going up on a barn roof for the first time. It was under construction, and coffee breaks seemed to happen very soon after I got up there, and everyone went down to the ground again. [Laugh] But you begin to get used to it.

CJ: I remember they brought out four huge poles from BC up Paquette Road. They had some kind of a huge aerial there in a diamond shape with four poles that were about, I don't know, they were about 120-140 feet height, the big BC firs they brought in.

And we had to climb those, and you couldn't get started with the belt. You had to put up and extension ladder and climb the extension ladder against the pole before you could throw the belt around.

EE: Because the tree was too--.

CJ: Yeah, before you could throw the belt and start climbing. You had to put the belt around because it was so big, you couldn't get enough grip with your fingers around the pole until you got up a few feet, and then it was ok. You could undo the belt and then climb with your hands.

EE: Sure. The joy of being a contractor, the owner of the firm, is you have other people doing this, I expect!

CJ: Well, I had that for about--. I was active both as a contractor and a worker for I guess about six years. Five, six years. Then I got right away from the tools. It just got too large. Had a bad problem with growth. We grew too fast. Financially, it was a problem and growth-wise it was a problem. We just multiplied too quick. I think we moved seven times in about 16 years.

EE: This is your own office?

CJ: Office and shop and everything.

EE: Sure. I see. And you had to be the brains of the outfit? Or did you have an office manager, for example, that was good on the paperwork?

[0:25:04]

CJ: No. You're looking at him! I was the office manager.

EE: I suspected as much! [Laughing]

CJ: I was the office manager and estimator, but then eventually I hired. I had two full-time estimators and--. Well, one was a full-time estimator, and one was part-time estimator and superintendent. Then I was on the overall.

EE: Sure, so this was your three-person operation that--.

CJ: No, then I had two girls.

EE: Yeah, in addition.

CJ: Yeah, two girls in that–receptionist and then a bookkeeper.

EE: And bookkeepers, of course, are worth their weight in gold if they're any good, aren't they? They're really--.

CJ: Absolutely.

EE: Keep control of everything at a bigger firm.

CJ: Yeah. I had the same girl for about, I don't know, 27 years or something. She worked there. Very good.

EE: The receptionist, of course, knows what's going on as well for that matter.

CJ: Yeah. They change a little bit, but my bookkeeper, she was there a long time.

EE: Yeah. Well, 27 years, if it began in '65, that would make it '92.

CJ: I guess that was a history of--. I was in business from '52 to--. No '59 until--. And I was in business 36 years.

EE: Mmhmm. So for the larger part of that period, the same person.

CJ: Mmhmm.

EE: Right. The electricians working for you, much of a muchness so to speak? They were similar skills, or would you differentiate amongst them in terms of different specialties?

CJ: I probably had one of the best crews in town because we could probably handle--. You know, like, we had about eight superintendents, so we could handle a job like--. Well, we did the Valhalla–and we could handle that–schools, and we did considerable work out of town. Sometimes in the mornings we'd have four to five trucks leaving to go out of town Monday morning at about 6:00 AM, 6:30 AM. Going in different directions.

EE: What would be your—let's say, let's take a school—what would the organization of your workforce at the school involve? A superintendent, I gather.

CJ: A superintendent, working superintendent. They really never involved that many, usually two to three even for a large school because it took quite a while. They took a long time to build. Maybe near the end when it came to finishing you had to put a couple more in there to finish it off, but normally usually they had about a two-man or three-man crew. That was about it.

EE: And of course, they're working away room by room or whatever, however you divide the work up. It's the same kind of work in every case, I suppose? Tying it into the control panels and so on.

CJ: Well, it goes up and it only goes up so fast. You can keep up with it. Yeah.

EE: Was industrial work different from that, or was it just larger in scale?

CJ: We didn't do a lot of industrial work.

EE: No, say Pool 7, for example. How many--? Or did you say earlier?

CJ: We had about six there.

EE: About six. So it isn't really out of proportion more. It's in a sense--. Well, it's twice as many but--.

CJ: Well, industrial mostly were existing buildings. Not too much new. The biggest industrial job was Ryco Chemical, when they were over by Canada Car there.

EE: Right. This is in support of the paper industry, I guess.

CJ: That was probably the biggest, costliest job we ever had for over $1 million that they just gave us.

EE: And the whole--. They were building from the ground up?

CJ: And they were building from the ground up.

EE: Yeah. And for the rest, you could be upgrading, revamping, or whatever.

CJ: Right.

EE: Are there additional things to be said about working in connection to the grain trade? Other elevators? Were there some that stand out in your mind in terms of being interesting?

CJ: Well, there was--. I forget the name of the small elevator that was one the waterfront because we did a lot of--. Heimbecker.

EE: Oh, yes. Right.

CJ: Something and--.

EE: Parrish & Heimbecker.

CJ: Parrish & Heimbecker. We did a lot of work there over the years. They pretty well used us for many years almost exclusively.

EE: So why would they need a lot of electrical work done?

CJ: I don't know. I don't think they had much of a staff of their own. They only had—I'm only guessing—but they only had, what, maybe a couple of electricians. So if it got beyond any regular maintenance or become a major item in maintenance, they called people in rather than have them on staff and half the time not having any work for them. So in those instances, we were getting called in to do the extra work.

[0:30:07]

EE: So, if you're doing a lot of work at this one relatively small elevator over the years, why was electrical work needing to be done? Was it changes in code or changes in regulation that--?

CJ: No, they brought in new cyclones and things from the west, you know, that they were making out west, and I think even here they started making them.

EE: So that's dust control, I think?

CJ: Yeah, mostly to do with dust control and progressive new equipment, and changing conveyor belts and conveyor systems that had to be wired, the motors, and stop-start stations for conveyor systems. So they were upgrading constantly. All the elevators were consistently upgrading.

EE: There was a time when the elevators were powered by, let's say, a central steam engine and ropes running the equipment. The electrical motors, of course, could change that completely. Were you involved in any of the conversions from the old--?

CJ: I remember big belts. Like I remember going to Hillcrest and being in the machine shop and they had the lathes run by belts instead of a direct drive like they would have on a modern lathe. And I remember down there that there were a lot of things that were operated by big wide, three-, four-inch-wide belts that--.

EE: now this was at the school that you're talking about, is it?

CJ: This was at Hillcrest for the machine shop, but they had on a much larger scale they had it in the elevator, and it was running a lot of different things that they were running it right off a pulley of a motor and then had these huge belts that were, I don't know, four or five inches in diameter and some of them 20-25 feet long and then, of course, doubled up.

EE: Right. We've seen ropes, pulleys and ropes.

CJ: Yeah, and a lot of that stuff changed over the years. They eliminated it, and they got direct drives or gear drives.

EE: Yes. Owen, you had a query? **[*… audio pauses***] I'll let you. Why don't you put the question in?

OM: Ok. Thanks, Ernie. Swede, I just wanted to get back to that point in your time when you were a young man and with your paper route and riding your bike down towards the shore in August of 1945. I was wondering if you could go into a little more depth of what you experienced and what happened and maybe that period of time between your seeing the explosion and your arriving on the scene.

CJ: Well, I guess the saddest time was I was a paper boy, and I was delivering to a lot of those fellows that got killed in that explosion. I knew their families and I knew their kids, and it was a very sad time for Current River. It took Current River a while—I don't know several years, I guess, if ever—to get over that tragedy because there were so many from Current River that got killed

in that explosion and/or maimed. I guess there was a few that got maimed and injured, and probably injured for life. But it really affected the whole population of Current River very much so.

OM: What do you remember about the explosion itself? Were you just kind of caught totally unawares or was there any sort of inkling something was happening?

CJ: I just heard a large *Boom!* And then I saw that cloud when I was on my bike, so I stopped right--. I was just coming to the crest of the hill, and I just stopped and observed. Then all of a sudden, flames started shooting out, and then I went down. Of course, it was concrete all over the place, and before you know it there was, I don't know, dozens of firetrucks there and ambulances and everything.

OM: You were one of the first people on the scene?

CJ: I was one of the first ones at the site.

OM: And so it probably was quite chaotic for the rest of the day there.

CJ: Yeah. Well, they set up a line right away to keep everybody back and just--. I guess they feared there might be a further explosion. But that had done so much damage that it just blew out the walls and there was cement all over.

OM: Rescue operation was going on at that time? Or were they trying to get the men out at that time or--?

CJ: Well, we couldn't get very close, and there was still a lot of--. Like it was early, and I don't think they could even get close to that fire. It was such a burning inferno. And it took a while before they could even get near it to rescue anybody.

OM: You were talking about Current River, the impact on it, and I was at the cemetery in Port Arthur a while back, and one of the tombstones that was pointed out was a young boy that had been killed in that explosion, and he was 16 years old. So and there were a number of people who were very close neighbours of yours at that time as well that would--.

[0:35:21]

CJ: Yeah. Well, my dad worked at that time at Thunder Bay Paper Mill down the highway, and we knew a lot of people in Current River. Well, I'd grown up there since I--. We moved there when I was about 6, and now I'm 14, so I'd been there most of my life

up until that time, and both of my parents knew a lot of people. I certainly knew a lot more than they did because I delivered papers there.

EE: Days of funerals, then, I guess, eh?

CJ: Pardon?

EE: Days of funerals from the various churches in Current River.

CJ: Yeah. It was a very sad situation.

EE: What actually--? Where had the explosion actually taken place, in one of the silos?

CJ: I would think in the storage bins. I'm not sure, but it's the bins that blew out. And I guess once the bin blows out, and if there's a spark or fire and it blows to the next bin, I guess, several bins blew out. And a lot of them were full of grain or half full of grain, and the grain spilled out onto the ground.

EE: Now these bins, would these have been the concrete? Were those the ones that had blown?

CJ: Yeah, they were huge. They were probably 20-25 feet in diameter and just like a huge cylinder that's maybe 100 feet high.

EE: Right. Yeah, that's what I'm calling silos, and some of those--.

CJ: Right, the silos.

EE: Some of those had blown apart?

CJ: Oh, they just blew the walls right out.

EE: Yeah. That's an awful lot of energy in the explosion, isn't it, to do that? Because we've witnessed the attempts to knock Pool 6 down, [laughs] and that took quite a while. That concrete is not easy to knock down, and I don't suppose Pool 4 was much less strong as far as that's concerned.

CJ: When I was going to high school, I worked down there for over the Christmas holidays and that to relieve fellows for holidays. I did what they called "banjoing," which was the old--. No, I'm sorry. This wasn't that elevator. This was at an older elevator that had flat bottoms. Most of the newer elevators all were like an ice cream cone bottom, so they just opened a chute there and the grain went onto a belt. But in the original elevators, they had a flat bottom. So there was a big hole in the centre of the floor, and that's where the grain went. Well, when they emptied the elevator, they wanted to get that grain out of there so it didn't mix with the new grain coming in.

So they had what they called "banjoing," which was a piece of metal about five feet long and about eight inches high with a handle on each end. And you threw it—two people handled it—and you threw it out and then pulled the grain. It went right through the grain like scissors, and then you pulled the grain through the hole. You got paid kind of piecework there. You went down and did one of those in an evening, and your evening was over. So you had to climb down with a harness on you and somebody feeding a rope down slowly in case you slip going down the [inaudible] ladder, which in a lot of places, the fastenings to the silo had let go. [Laughs] So you went down this ladder, and this comes heights again. If you don't like height, you don't do that because this was about 100-120 feet in the air where you would climb down, and there was one lightbulb hanging.

And that was the other thing. That was just an ordinary lightbulb like on an extension cord. There was nothing explosion proof. It was just an extension cord hanging down with like a 200-watt lightbulb on the end of it, and that lit the silo on the bottom. They just lowered it to maybe 20 feet above you so you could see because there was no lights in there whatsoever.

EE: You'd need that. So two of you would be lowered down to--?

CJ: So the two of us would climb down that ladder one at a time, and they'd feed that rope, and you'd have that harness on. You get down until it went up to your waist in grain, and then they also, of course, lowered the "banjo" they called it. They lowered that down on a rope, and then they pulled it up again at the end of the day. They'd come around every half hour or so and check on you to see if--. And holler down to check on if everything was ok.

[0:40:08]

EE: So was this a job for high school students then?

CJ: This was the job that I had. I think, it was over the Christmas holidays, yeah. Mmhmm.

EE: Yeah. Just once?

CJ: That was one season. Other seasons, I worked for delivering mail at Christmas for the post office. I worked since I was about six.

EE: So this was a second experience in the grain trade early on? [Laughs]

CJ: Yeah. And probably, I just noticed in the paper last night, they must be looking for—the *Chronicle* must be looking for—I don't know 50 or 60 paper boys. It was in the paper last night, different routes and what they pay. I was just amazed because I guess people today, they don't care if their children work or just what, but that is a learning experience that possibly had a lot to do with me going into business. You learn to collect money. You learn that you can't trust everybody, and they disappear on collection day, or they move out and left you with two weeks, and you had to go good for it to the *News Chronicle* at that time, and you still had to pay up even though you didn't collect the money. It was a very learning experience, and like I carried papers for about three years anyways. I had probably the biggest route in Current River out of everybody. I had about 120 papers, and I had to take a streetcar down to the *Chronicle*, which was right where the Marina Tower office building is now.

EE: Oh, yes.

CJ: Yeah, it was right there. And then I had to get my papers, and according to how you handed in your collect is how they distributed the papers to the paperboys. So if you got your collect in early, you got your papers early. If you got it in late, and people paid you or you were fortunate enough to have enough money in cash that you could pay before you got paid, you got your papers earlier, you know? Then take a streetcar and go back to Hodder Avenue, get off at the Hodder Avenue Hotel, and then I went up as far as the water tower, and then I went over as far as Grenville Avenue and Dewe Avenue. And I covered right from where the rec centre is there right through to Black Bay Road and right up Leslie Avenue to the water tower where the old Ski Club used to be, and right up on top of the hill even before you get to the expressway.

EE: Well, that sounds like most of Current River.

CJ: Yeah. Well, the upper part. I would get out of school at 4:00, whatever, and I'd get home around 7:00 in the evening by the time I was finished my paper route. So, my father taught me how to work.

EE: That is a real learning experience, no question about it.

CJ: Yeah. It is. And it's too bad a lot of the kids are missing it today because I think it has a lot to do with becoming an entrepreneur if you get into that type of work early where you're responsible rather than employed by someone else.

OM: Al Patroni had the exact same story. It basically got him going by having to sell papers, and he had a number, and he said that was a great learning experience for him.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: They talk about the social media these days. The medium, the newspaper, was quite the social thing in its day! [Laughs]

CJ: Oh, yes. Only had radio and--. Newspaper and radio, that was about it. [Laughs]

EE: But in terms of getting to know people, learning things and so on, interacting with your community, I daresay it would be good experience.

CJ: Exactly.

EE: Your electricians were members of the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, I suppose, IEBW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers]?

CJ: I was for about seven years. Well, you don't become what they classify as an A-member until you become a journeyman electrician. So you became like a B-member, which is an apprentice, and you paid a lesser rate of dues per month until you become a journeyman, and then you paid the going rate.

EE: Right. Do you remain a member even when you're a contractor?

CJ: No. No, no. The day I started contracting is the day I departed as a union member.

EE: Yes. Did your electricians--?

CJ: But I was union contractor. I was a union contractor, but I did not belong to the union.

EE: Sure. Yeah. Your men were union members.

CJ: All my staff belonged to the union.

EE: How were negotiations conducted locally? Or was there negotiations?

CJ: I was the negotiator for probably 15 years.

EE: For all the electricians? Was there local--?

CJ: I negotiated for all of the District of Thunder Bay pretty well. Everything was run out of here. And then when Ontario became--. We went into provincial bargaining, and Ontario came under one huge electrical agreement that took in 13 unions. I represented from Manitoba border to White River and Kapuskasing.

[0:45:28]

EE: Now, did this mean--.

CJ: I represented that area, and I remember going down for negotiations trying to get 13 unions to agree and make our first agreement as a contractor. I think I went to Toronto that year 32 times and sat in a hotel until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and negotiated with these guys. It was tough slugging. That took months, and it cost a lot of money in the electrical business.

EE: Was there work stoppage during the negotiations?

CJ: No. No, not to my knowledge. No. I think we were all under various agreements. That didn't mean that everybody was the same, but it was negotiated that when we got a raise, Toronto got a--. Everybody got a raise together. There were certain things that were negotiated in there that applied to everybody across the province, and then there were other items that only applied to certain areas.

EE: Yeah. I suppose Toronto might have particular requirements, or would the District of Thunder Bay be more likely to have its own special concern?

CJ: Well, we were heavy into room and board because we did a lot of work out of town in the district, and a lot of people down in Toronto, they don't go much farther than Toronto or Niagara Falls. So, I recall sitting at that bargaining table one day, and we were

bargaining on room and board and everything, and they said, “Well, we don’t know if we want to get involved with room and board.” He says, “Like there’s some of us here in Toronto, we go as far as Niagara Falls.” And I remember telling him, I said, “You know, in Northern Ontario, we go that far on a flat tire.” [Laughing]

EE: The joy in saying that!

CJ: I did. I enjoyed saying that. So they kind of shut up and left us alone on room and board.

EE: And you arrived at an agreement on that?

CJ: Yeah. Like Northern Ontario, Toronto area—the Greater Toronto Area, even—will fit in one little wee corner. [Laughing]

EE: Yes. It’s a pleasure to remind them of that. Would you say that your relations with the workers or as a contractor with the workers was good over the years?

CJ: I had excellent relations. I had fantastic relations with my staff. My staff were so good that when we had our--. When I closed up and we had our tenth, it was actually the tenth year, a couple of my staff phoned me and said, “Would you mind if we have at C. A. Johnson Electric reunion party?” She says they were working for, oh, six or seven different outfits, but most of them are managing most of the bigger jobs around Thunder Bay to this day, the superintendents I had. Although now some of them are starting to retire. But they had invited the wife and I and they had a big party. We invited--. They looked up all the numbers for all the people that had worked for us, even if they worked six months over the 36 years, if they could track them down, and invited them all, and we had about, I guess, we had about 75 or 80 at the party.

EE: 80 workers, plus partners?

CJ: This was workers and wife.

EE: Workers and wives.

CJ: Yeah. It was a double outfit. That was ten years after I retired.

EE: Right.

CJ: So, I don't think they do that for every employer.

EE: No, I wouldn't think so! [Laughing]

CJ: Unless they had a care. But to this day I meet them, and they don't hesitate to want to buy me a coffee or something. I say, "Oh, no, no. I'll get the coffee. Don't worry about it." [Laughing] You know? No, I had a terrific staff. They were great guys.

EE: Sure. Well, we've--. Let me get to some of these particular questions we've got added in here. As you look back over the work that you did here in the city—and in the grain trade particularly, of course, for our purposes—what would you like people to remember about the work that you did? Over and above the retirement party? [Laughs]

CJ: Well, the grain trade, I think I've just about discussed that as much as we did. We weren't huge in the grain trade. We were more into commercial with schools and malls, a lot of out-of-town work. We did a lot of gas stations. We did places like the Valhalla and Thunder Bay Mall and the police station and that type of work.

[0:50:10]

EE: I suppose the--.

CJ: The college.

EE: What we might do--.

CJ: University.

EE: Conceivably the university. Would be to put this in context. The elevators were simply one more opportunity or challenge, whatever it might be.

CJ: Right.

EE: One more of the kind of work that had to be done.

CJ: Well, we did everything that pretty well pertained, that needed electrical work, you know? The only thing we didn't get involved with very much over the years was paper mills.

EE: Mmhmm.

CJ: I was a kind of a--. I was kind of--. I had a reason for that. The paper mills—and I'm not criticizing—but they always supplied the major equipment like distribution panels, heavy wiring, and a contractor was left to look after the nuts and bolts and the straps and the connectors and all the odds and ends. And they bought and paid for the huge cables, and they had them onsite when we got there and that. So the contractor didn't get any of that, and I just found it difficult to be in business and not supply the materials. So of course, now your labour rate has to go up considerably, and your labour is your biggest gamble.

EE: Because there's a margin on the materials?

CJ: There's a margin on material labour.

EE: For you when you're providing it.

CJ: Yeah. But when you work for a mill, you have a much, much larger margin on your labour because you're literally supplying very, very little material.

EE: And did they recognize that, I suppose?

CJ: Oh, I think they do. And I guess it's for—they probably have their reason—not only for the money, but because sometimes delivery. You know, they can order this stuff and have it sitting there when they call the contractor in to do the job.

EE: Did you work mines at all?

CJ: Not really. A little. We did a little work--.

EE: This wasn't--. Most of the period intensely, there wasn't a lot of mining in this immediate area, was there?

CJ: We did a little work down at Hemlo and that, yeah. We didn't do a lot in mining.

EE: No, but there was lots of other work. Right.

CJ: And that was kind of--. The mines were kind of in a different area, which covered by Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie.

EE: That's what I was thinking.

CJ: And once you get the other side of White River, we don't really have jurisdiction.

EE: No.

CJ: But we did some work in Hemlo on that at one time.

EE: Right. The main mine that comes to mind might be Shebandowan, but in our more immediate area.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: Atikokan. Well, that's before your time, again. The Steep Rock and so on, that's early.

CJ: Well, I wasn't out there. I'd just gotten married, and we bought a property out there in Shebandowan, and I remember that mining going ahead. But we weren't part of it.

EE: And that was--. It was an Inco operation, was it?

CJ: Uh, Inco, yeah.

EE: Yeah. So probably the Sudbury people who were organizing all of that and so on and so forth.

CJ: Right.

EE: Is there anything about the work that you did that would interest people or surprise them? You know, in terms of John Q. Public out there listening to this.

CJ: Well, we were very diversified. We were probably one of the most diversified shops in Thunder Bay, that we did just about everything, you know? Whether it was schools, malls, out-of-town work–considerable out-of-town work down in Fort Frances and out to Kenora and up to Red Lake. I said earlier up to Red Lake, and as far as I remember we did a Canadian Tire store with Tom Jones in Sudbury, and we did a high school in Wawa. We did considerable work. Longlac, Geraldton, Bell telephone buildings, Brewers Retail.

EE: Were there working associations? I mean to say not in terms of organizations as such, but relationships—I guess that's the word I want—with specific contractors? You mentioned Tom Jones now for example. Would you have done the electrical work on many a Jones property?

CJ: I probably did—way back when we were both younger—I probably did, I'm just guessing, 70 percent, 75 percent of his work, and I did probably about as much with Gateway, and I did probably half with Stead & Lindstrom and some with Clayton Construction. And yes, you get a name with them and money--. Money is very important, but completion date--. When you're on a schedule, you have to be finished on a certain day because the store's moving in and the furniture's arriving, shelving's arriving, and if you can't schedule to that and you're not ready, it's going to cost somebody a lot of money. And there's big penalties.

[0:55:10]

EE: Sure. The bids would be separate, would they? Jones would be bidding for the structural work, and you'd be bidding quite separately for the electrical? Or--.

CJ: I would bid to Jones as a subcontractor, and Gateway, and Stead & Lindstrom, and the rest of them.

EE: Right. Yeah. But you're bidding towards whoever is going to pay for it all? Yours is a subcontract. Or were you together in the bid?

CJ: Oh, there were jobs we did like with Gateway, we did the original Complex.

EE: The Canada Games Complex?

CJ: Canada Games Complex, we put that package together and we did that with Gateway.

EE: It was a combined bid for the contract?

CJ: Right. And then we did other, quite a bit of work like that, with Tom Jones as well and Gateway both.

EE: Yes. Big firms. Ok. What are you most proud of? Other than happy employees! [Laughing] What are you most proud of in your years of building in the city?

CJ: Well, I think one of the things I'm the proudest of, I was in business for 36 years. Like I did start small, but we grew quite rapidly, and we got up to where we had up to as high as 55 people and probably regular staff around 25 on an average. And in all those years, our worst injury was a broken toe. I thought that was a record to be proud of. And we used to stress to the men to really look after the kids coming out of high school, the apprentices, and we pretty well stuck to hiring electrical majors out of the high schools. We were pretty specific on that. We just didn't hire anybody. I had a great way of interviewing. I would invite the kid in and interview him, and I would tell him that, "Well, we don't have an opening for an electrician right now, but I've got a friend of mine that has an opening for a plumbing apprentice. Would you be interested in that?" And if he said yes, I said, "Well, goodbye. The interview is over." And then the next one would come in and he said, "No, sir." He says, "I want to be an electrician." I said, "Well, you're my man. You've just got yourself a job." [Laughing]

OM: He was focused.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: Well, electricity is dangerous stuff, and kids have been killed when they weren't properly trained and so on and so forth. That's a terrific safety record that you have to boast about.

CJ: Yeah. That was--. I think so. And like I say, we really stressed safety. Every Christmas party and everything, I'd go out of my way to thank the journeymen and that for taking care of the apprentices. Because it's the fellows who come out of school and for the first four or five years that are not familiar with all the hazards on the job, and there are lots of them. Like electricity, getting electrocuted is one, but that's only one, and that's probably back a ways. There is a lot of worse ways to get hurt than with electricity.

EE: Yes, I daresay.

CJ: In the construction field.

EE: Although electricity itself can be--. So you never had anyone electrocuted on the job in any way, shape, or--?

CJ: No. I probably got as many shocks as anybody. But, you know, some of us we still--. I test with my fingers. [Laughing] If I test that, I put two fingers in. The power runs from here to here. It takes the shortest path, so. But I make sure I'm not standing on wet concrete. [Laughs]

EE: Electrical current going through the body is a very interesting experience.

CJ: Oh, you can get that if you get it in the wrong way. Yeah.

EE: I mean, if I were to waste time here, I was down in the basement one day when we were living in Nelson, working away with I guess it was probably a jigsaw, and it needed--. The plugging on the cord parted a little bit, and I went to join them with the saw blade in my hands, and I guess it dropped through and joined the current. And suddenly I had 60-cycle current going through at least my hand. I still, actually, the--. You can see, I think, that's the little white spot there.

CJ: Oh, yeah. Right.

EE: Is where some of the current went into my right finger and so on. I didn't--. Fortunately, someone had came down. Because you make a noise when you do this, and my wife came down—or was it our son? All they have to do is break the current, of course, and then stop it. But we were going to go out that evening, and I decided to stretch out and just relax because it's a traumatic experience that.

[1:00:13]

CJ: I recall I think it was on Ambrose Street, we were changing over an electrical service, and he's cutting the wires off, the journeyman up there. I was only a second year apprentice and he was cutting it off. He leaned and he held onto the stack and was absent-minded just for a few seconds, and of course the power goes through here and right through the chest and everything. All I heard was a big roar, and he was stuck up there. So he was on an extension ladder, so I shook hell out of the ladder, and he comes tumbling down and broke a couple of rungs at the bottom. He was banged up a little bit, but he was ok.

EE: But still alive.

CJ: I just shook hell out of the ladder, that's all.

EE: That kind of experience teaches you about care.

CJ: Yeah. That was about the closest call we've had in--. And I got a good shot one time in an attic. You know, hanging on and it was all the metallic cable, and I got it through both hands, but somehow, I got off. The trouble with electricity, of course, if you wrap your hand around it, you can't open it.

EE: That's right, because it just immobilizes the hand. That's right.

CJ: Yeah, and that's the problem when you test. You always use the back of your hand if you're not sure. And I for years did that quite a bit and once in a while got a little shock, but nothing too bad! [Laughing]

EE: Right. Well, there are some other questions about the international grain trade, which really aren't relevant to your own experience, I think. Is there anything you want to add to what you had to say about your relationship to the grain trade in the work that your men did or the contracts that you took on?

CJ: No. It was interesting to work down there, and I remember being down there a few times meeting people coming off the boats. Even sitting down having a cup, I got invited aboard and went in and even had a couple of drinks with them while they were in port. And how they loaded the boats and everything, it was very interesting. The whole trade was very interesting. The grain part was certainly interesting, but in all aspects. Electrical and construction in general is very interesting. If I come back for a lifetime, I would probably do it again. [Laughing] I loved it. I loved the challenge. I loved the gambling, and it is a gamble. I don't go to the casino at all because I said, "I did my gambling."

EE: [Laughs] You've had a lifetime of it!

CJ: Yeah. You're bidding on jobs and you're going by, "How long is it going to take so-and-so to do? How long is it going to take six men to do this job that's going to take a year?" There's a certain gamble to it, and the weather has a lot to do with it. The men themselves have a lot to do with it. The general contractor has a lot to do with it. So you're doing a lot of gambling. You're taking what you might call an educated guess.

EE: When you got the estimators, the guys to help you, it of course took some kind of weight off you, and yet you're responsible. You're finding the working capital. You're the one who depends on the profit.

CJ: Right. The dollar comes back to you.

EE: That's right.

CJ: We've had good ones and we've had bad ones, you know? We've had years when we've been very, very fortunate and did very, very well, and we've also had years where we'd gone in and lost $150,000, and we've had years that we've gone in and made $250,000. You just don't know sometimes. I mean, most jobs go along fairly close to what you're allowing, but then the odd one goes the other way. And it doesn't matter how careful you are, you're going to get one of those bad ones once in a while, or the weather's going to affect you. If it's outside, the weather's going to affect you. The guy's going to work, and it starts to pour rain, or it starts to snow, gets cold. The performances goes way down when it gets cold.

EE: Sure. Yeah, the cold is bound to have a terrible impact on productivity, and rain can too, unless the building's enclosed already or whatever. Did you have a good relationship with a chartered bank, if I may ask, in terms of carrying you through this?

CJ: Yeah. I had good relationships with Scotiabank and Royal Bank both. Yeah. Over the years. Yeah, very good. They went out of their way sometimes to help me when I was on the edge, so called, and so called "a bit over extended." [Laughing]

EE: Yeah. It's not a history that is known particularly to people who haven't been in business, but I know from some of my reading of Canadian history, the chartered banks of this country have played a very important role for more than 100 years in backing and financing the trade and the industry of this country.

[1:05:12]

CJ: Yeah, I think--. I don't know how much it is now, but I think back then it was that a banker relied a lot on who you were and what you were like and how hard you worked, and I think they realized that things can go up and down. Everything's not going to be always great. You can be on strike for a while with no work and your overhead carries on, and you can go through some pretty tough times. You can have a bad job or a couple of bad jobs, but you can also have some good ones. And as long as you played ball with them and treated them fairly, they certainly came back and treated you. I think it had, more so than today, they recognized the person rather than how much money you made or the bottom line. They looked at him when they gave him credit and how much credit they would give him, and the bottom line certainly comes into affect, but certainly much more so today than it did then.

EE: Speaking now as a consumer, if you will, rather than a businessperson in my relationship to a bank, one of the greatest changes has been the fact that there was a time--. And I remember a banker saying to me quietly, this may have been 20, 30 years ago, "If

you can't trust the middle class, who can you trust writing a signature?" [Laughing] Which shows, again, an assessment of character. "I'll be good for it." What's happened with the establishment of personal lines of credit, of course, is that the banks haven't had to have loan officers out there for people. Although, they've made their assessment of character, I guess, in terms of the amount of credit that you're allowed. So you really manage your own indebtedness. Have businesspeople experienced anything similar? Now this has really happened through the 90s over the last 15 or 20 years, I guess, the development of personal lines of credit. It was actually happening in the 80s.

CJ: Well, if you go into business, you have to give a personal line of credit. There's no way around it unless you're a very wealthy person and you have a lot of capital to start with. But if you're like the typical entrepreneur that has little or no capital, you have to personally sign. And I remember, you know, partners—I never did have a partner in the electrical business—but I remember people approaching me wanting to become a partner. I would say, "Ok." We'd sit down and everything would be fine, and I said, "Now, you're going to have to go to the bank and you have to go and sign on the dotted line that you and your spouse are responsible." "Well," he says, "My wife would never go for that." "Well," I said, "if your wife's going to control you," I said, "I don't really want you for a partner." [Laughing] You know? I said, "That's the way the game works. And if you haven't got enough faith in yourself like I have," I said, "my spouse had to sign off on everything, and your spouse has to." And I said, "If you haven't got enough faith in yourself, you really shouldn't be in business." That got rid of most anybody that wanted to be a partner.

EE: [Laughs] I take it they weren't bringing money to you?

CJ: No, no.

EE: They just wanted a share.

CJ: It's easy if you got a payday every week or every two weeks. It's not a big problem. But the toughest thing is to make that tough, tough decision, especially when you have no working capital to speak of and you've got to make that decision that that payday ceases, and you have no money to fall back on to speak of. You've still got a mortgage on the house, and you've got a wife, and you've got to make ends meet. And even if she's got a job, she helps, but you've got to try to pay your way. So the first few years, you watch your staff go finishing and enjoying the weekends, and you're in there on Saturday and Sunday doing billing and estimating and then supervising and running around to see the jobs are getting done properly during the week and going in at 4:00 in the morning doing estimating, and the phone starts ringing at 8:00, and the men come in. And if you're not prepared to do that, don't go into business.

EE: No. An uncle--.

CJ: Not without capital behind you. If you've got lots of capital, it's much easier, [laughing] but I think it's harder to survive.

EE: An uncle of mine was in housing construction in Winnipeg in the 50s, and my understanding was that the mortgage was in his wife's name, and the title to the house. Is that general?

[1:10:11]

CJ: Well, you can, but I guess that's a way to do it. You can do it, but it's up to the bank how deep they're going to dig. I'm sure they want--. It can be in her name, but she's got to--. They call her in to sign and said that you're entitled to half that home or whatever and--.

EE: I take it the house was in play, too. [Laughs]

CJ: It can't be in her name then.

EE: I apologize for delving that far.

CJ: No, no.

EE: I mean, this is--. [Laughs] Except that it is part of the business, I guess.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: Well, are there changes, challenges? Owen, would you want to--?

OM: Just one more question.

EE: Sure, by all means.

OM: Ernie and I complement each other here. Character sounds like it's an important aspect of your own self worth as well as how you work with other people, but you mentioned your father kind of instilled a work ethic in you. What can you tell us about that?

CJ: Well, my parents were both from the old country. They immigrated here in the late ‘20s.

EE: From Sweden?

CJ: From Sweden. And I was brought up in a house that literally didn’t know what debt was. I think other than maybe a mortgage on the house or a loan to pay that down, a car was never had unless it was bought cash. Although my dad did buy two or three new cars, but it wasn’t bought unless you had the cash. TV set wasn’t bought unless you had the cash. So I grew up in a house like that. I had a very difficult time going into business and credit. [EE laughs] I was so--.

EE: I can imagine!

CJ: I was so lost that when I went into business, I was paying invoices. I would go into a supplier and get some wire, and I’d come in a couple days later. And I’d get the bill in the mail, and I’d come in and pay them. So I was issuing maybe one guy like General Electric, or one outfit like General Electric maybe, 10 cheques, 15-20 cheques a month, and there was four or five of them. So one day they told me, “Look, you get what they call a statement at the end of the month, and if you pay that in ten days, we’re quite happy. And as long as it’s not too high, we’re going to put you on a limit that you can only buy $3,000 worth of material. You can’t get over that unless you come in and pay for something.” “But,” he said, “other than that, as long as you keep it under this limit, we’ll give you 10 or 15 days after the end of the month to pay it.” I says, “Is that right? Holy smokes!” So. [Laughs] That’s what I did. [Laughing]

EE: Because the fact of the matter is I’m guessing each cheque cost you something at the bank?

CJ: Oh, yeah. Probably, yeah.

EE: And they were paying--. They were having--.

CJ: Probably wondering what I was doing.

EE: You were costing them 10 or 15 times the monthly statement!

OM: And the additional paperwork.

EE: Of course. Exactly.

CJ: But I went through for an electrician, so I didn't take the commercial end of it. [Laughing] So if I had had a little bit of actual business experience instead of learning it the hard way, things would have been a little better too. But it didn't take too long to start learning.

EE: You get the picture. But that's a tough school that your father put you through or the family experience, but it's a kind of probity that just doesn't exist these days, does it?

CJ: And when I left Peterson Electric to go on my own, and I had worked for Peterson Electric for seven years--. I worked on Sears when they built that Intercity, and I got on loan demands because Peterson ran out of work, but he kept me on so that when--. I must have worked over there. I worked over there for over a year at Sears because Peterson was very quiet, but they paid him. I don't know, they paid him an extra dollar or two dollars an hour for my time, I guess. I was just like a lease to them, and I was an apprentice then. But he was a terrific employer and trained me well, and I don't know. I just decided to go on my own, and then my dad talked to me and said, "Mr. Peterson's been very good with you all those years. He loaned you out. You haven't lost a week's work, two week's work in seven years. Why are you leaving him? Why are you taking this crazy chance? You know, you don't know if you're going to be bankrupt tomorrow." But they'd gone through the Depression and everything, my parents, and they knew what the Depression was like. They kind of frowned on this. I said, "Well, dad, it's something I want to try."

[1:15:21]

EE: Whereas you'd come through '57—52 to '59 then, was it?

CJ: '52 to '59, yeah.

EE: The construction and whatnot boom that Canada went through that dozen years after the war. Maybe '58/'59, things weren't so good, but you could still see the future, and the '60s, of course, bore it out, didn't it? Natural--.

CJ: Well, like I said, there was gas. It was gas that made me. Those three, four years in gas, I did very well.

EE: I haven't researched the beginning of the natural gas, and I know there was some scandal about it as well, but when did the natural gas--? Was it already in prospect when you decided to start your own firm, or did it follow on?

CJ: No, I don't think so. I think it was just starting, I think. Because I just started my own in June of '59, and I think it was in '60/'61 that gas—maybe a couple years earlier, I'm not sure—that gas started to come in. Well, it took me a little while before I made connections, and all of a sudden, I got this and then I got this, Eaton's, and I got Sears work. Well, they were the two biggest stores. Then I got all these other different ones, and we really had a routine to go in and do these furnaces just like that and they were done, you know? In and out, in and out, and crazy hours.

Going in January and telling the people to turn the temperature up to 85 in January, and they'd come in and haul that furnace out and put the new one in and duct work and everything had to replace it. Put new duct work and everything, and they'd have about four guys working there or five guys. They'd put it in. At 2:00 in the afternoon, it was ready to wire. We'd be in there, and they were just putting the last parts in, and we'd be in there to get the heat back on because it was January. Sometimes until 10:30-11:00 at night we'd be working and come out of there just like we'd been working in a coal bin. It hit the timber there where the wire was strapped on, and the coal dust would come down like a cloud. [Laughing]

EE: Oh, yeah. Technological change in the heating industry.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: People have forgotten a lot of that!

CJ: There was stokers and all that back in those days, eh?

EE: Yeah. Where I got my electrical shock was quite close to a coal-burning furnace in Nelson, BC, that still had the stoker. [Laughs] Anyway. Well, it's been a great pleasure to have done this.

CJ: Well, thank you. I don't know if I've been of any help.

EE: Oh, you've told us--. You've given us a very good account of many things, including the character of one first-rate businessman.

CJ: But, you know, I'm limited on the elevators.

EE: Sure.

CJ: Like I say, we did--. I don't know. We probably did a couple million dollars worth of work in the elevators, but that was a small portion. Like when I started, I started with $800, and eight years later we were doing $5 million, you know? I had saved an $800 working capital. [Laughing] But like I said, the first five years were not fun.

OM: No.

EE: No. Well, and there was—probably that would be '64—there was probably a certain amount of economic uncertainty through those years nationally and maybe on a continental--. Well, began. The early '60s, and as you say here natural gas really was a--.

CJ: But you were in a type of thing with natural gas that your labour was your biggest item that you had to finance. Your material was limited. And if you were to get into doing schools or malls or anything like that, like, you have to have a certain working capital, you know? It was not unusual for us to have a million receivables, like--.

EE: No. No, I daresay.

CJ: It was quite common to have a million or a million-three, a million-two receivables.

EE: Six digits always becomes seven becomes very interesting.

CJ: So when you've got 800 bucks, you don't go and do those kind of jobs. [Laughing]

EE: No, no. Unless you've got a banker with deep pockets.

OM: They say the first million is the toughest one to make. [Laughing]

EE: Mr. Peterson was a Swede as well?

CJ: No, he's Finn.

EE: Oh, so he's Finn. Oh. That could be one of those great differences.

CJ: But he's a great guy. When there's birthday parties, and I see him every once in a while. We get along great. Always have. I can't have greater respect for anybody that I know of than Eric Peterson.

EE: He'd be a Finn, Swede?

CJ: His old place is right over here, eh?

EE: He's not a--.

CJ: He just has his 90—what the heck was it?—94th birthday, I think, or 95th.

EE: I see.

CJ: Yeah.

EE: So being an electrician doesn't kill a guy, or at least a contractor.

CJ: No! [Laughing] No, he's like me. He was still working. His son-in-law has The Telephone. His apartment, The Telephone, over there at Intercity, and he did that building for them. He wired that building for them.

EE: Sure. Well, thanks very much again, Swede.

CJ: You're very welcome! Thank you very much for asking me!

OM: That was great. Thank you very much.

CJ: My pleasure. Thank you.

End of interview.