

Narrator: Robert Kaplanis (RK)

Company Affiliations: Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR)

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Summary: General yardmaster of the Canadian Pacific Railway's Thunder Bay operation Robert Kaplanis describes his ascent through the company from callboy to car checker to yardmaster, and the growing responsibilities of each role. He discusses the railway's grain operations before and after the advent of grain pooling, including the early use of the hump yard and the eventual 24-hour operations. Kaplanis then describes the CPR upper executive's attempts to restructure the Thunder Bay operations, which caused fracturing and ill-feelings amongst the workforce, leading eventually to Kaplanis' early retirement. Other topics discussed include women entering the male-dominated field, railway operating ratios, demerit systems of employee infractions, rapid turnover of railway bosses, downsizing and cost-cutting, and grain trucking across the border.

Keywords: Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR); Grain transportation—rail; Yardmaster; General yardmaster; Grain car checking; Westfort hump yard; Westfort; Fort William; Port Arthur; Grain pooling; Canadian National Railway (CNR); Hopper railcars; Grain Transportation Agency (GTA); Management philosophies; Management levels; Corporate executive; Rail export shipping; Corporate restructuring; Downsizing; Canadian Wheat Board (CWB); Grain transportation—trucking; Prairies; Grain farmers/producers

Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, it's a great pleasure to be here this afternoon to do this interview with you about your experience in relation to the grain trade. Let's start by my asking you to put on the record your name and place and date of birth so that it's there in the electronic as well as on paper, as I've already got it.
RK: Sure. My name is Robert Kaplanis. I'm known as Bob to everyone. I was born before the cities amalgamated in Fort William, Ontario at the McKellar Hospital—which is gone now or partially gone—on March 5, 1943.

EE: Great. Thanks very much. And then we want to discover how you came to work in the grain trade and that involves transportation, I believe.

RK: Well, that is an interesting part of my history also because I was one of the individuals come from a big family—six boys, one girl—parents separated, so we all felt the need to do our contribution. And I was in high school, and I really, honestly, to be honest, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up so to speak, and back in those days they weren't encouraging you. You just were going to school for the purpose of going to school. But then I heard that the railway was hiring. We're going back 1960.

EE: Mmhmm. I was just thinking--.

RK: Things were booming around here back then.

EE: 17, 18.

RK: I was in Grade 10, and I decided to go and apply. They wanted me to work immediately, so I wouldn't have been able to finish schooling, so I did. Everyone tried to talk me out of it at school, including a couple of the teachers, but not aggressively. I think maybe a lot of them knew, you know, understood. Hard on the railway at that time. Didn't have a clue what I was getting myself into other than a regular paycheque, and I knew going in that it was going to be a lot of weekend work and night work and that sort of thing. My friends were giving me a rough time about that. They thought I was going to miss my youth, et cetera. And as it turned out, I never got laid off. Worked there 37 years and never missed a day, so.

EE: 1998?

RK: Pardon?

EE: Until 1998 then?

RK: That's correct.

EE: Yeah.

RK: It was just the way things were, you know? People were getting laid off later, but by that time I had enough seniority to hang on. And interesting that a lot of my close buddies who stayed at school and graduated came to see me four or five years later--.

[Woman]: Anyone want a soda or a--? You're good?

RK: Yeah. To look for work because they were finished school and they needed jobs. So as it turned out, I was able to get them applications and that sort of thing. So that's how I got in the business.

EE: And the rail hirers had no concerns or qualms about taking you out of Grade 10 to put you to work, eh?

RK: Not a bit. They were--.

EE: Were there any family connections or friendships to the railway that facilitated this?

RK: Tony, my brother Tony. Anthony, I guess, is--.

EE: We interviewed him the other day.

RK: Well, he was at the railway, and he twigged me in and whoever else was listening that they would be hiring. So that's what drove me there, and no doubt it helped. He had a good name there and I guess they weren't going to--. If I was a chip off the block there, they--.

EE: Sure.

RK: They sort of knew. You know, back then, a lot of family hired on the railway because if the father made it, and if the father was there to watch the kids, then he'd make sure the kids stay in line and go to work when they're supposed to. That sort of thing.

EE: And now which of the railways was this?

RK: Pardon?

EE: With which company?

RK: Canadian Pacific. CP, yeah.

EE: So with CP or CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] then, I guess. It became CP Rail a little later.

RK: CPR. Yeah. Back then, CN [Canadian National Railway] was government controlled back then and--.

EE: Apropos of this matter of hiring you out of high school, at a later point did the company ever become interested in academic upgrading for its employees?

RK: They did, but not me. But they did. In the late '80s, the company was changing philosophy, and they wanted to change I think from a typical railway culture to a more of a business culture. So more of their higher-up officers were given the opportunity to go to school and upgrade their economic degrees and this sort of stuff.

EE: This would imply high school completion for them.

RK: Right.

EE: And onto university, then.

RK: But to be truthful, after--. When I started accepting promotions, and when you start filling out applications et cetera, and you come to the area where it says "Education," I always showed high school education. I never really said I finished in Grade 10, and nobody ever asked me, so.

[0:05:14]

EE: No, no. Well, it was up to them if they were really concerned to ask exactly how much high school.

RK Yeah. But to answer your question, Ernie, no. I think the company was--. They didn't get into it back then. They were looking for employees, and once they got you there--.

EE: And of course, railroading is a highly skilled business, and so they were involved in providing you with training for that.

RK: It was a lot of training, exactly.

EE: So we might explore that then. How did you--? What did you begin doing and what did you move on through?

RK: The entry-level job at the railway at that time was what they called a crew-bus messenger or a call boy. And what you did is you went and woke up the rail crews who lived in the cabooses here. At that time, we had a lot of Schreiber and Kenora or Ignace people who would arrive on trains and sleep in their cabooses and then leave the next day back to their hometown. My job at that time was to go and wake them up at 3:00 in the morning, 4:00, whatever time it is. Get them out of bed and start making breakfast because their train is going to be here in an hour and a half, and they're going to have to get on and take it away. That included passenger. Back in the day we had passenger trains running through Thunder Bay, stopping at Port Arthur and Fort William. So I'd have to wake those fellows up also. That was for about a year, and then after that--.

EE: And you'd be working an eight-hour shift or whatever during the night then?

RK: Yeah. When you hire on, you kind of know that you're going to be doing a lot of the nightwork because the guys--.

EE: That's where you start.

RK: Yeah, you know, and so you accept that. So it was a lot of the--. Well, as a matter of fact, I think probably the first 15 years of my career were shift work, a lot of it night work. Then after that, you kind of looked at the bulletin boards, and you see what's the next job and how much does it pay. In my case, every time I saw a job that paid a nickel more or a dollar more, I mean, I took it. It was like car checking. A lot of it when you hire on, you hire on in what was known as the "non-operating department," which was clerical, bookkeeping, car tracking, that sort of stuff. The operating department, that was the engineering, the--.

EE: The running of trains and so on.

RK: Engineer--. Running trains, exactly. Another interesting part of my story was when I hired on the railway, I had bad eye vision, and that kind of, I guess, precluded the opportunity of me going to the running trades because they had some pretty strict restrictions with eye vision care and that sort of stuff. They relaxed those restrictions years later, but because of that restriction, I stayed with the non-operating department. And then I stayed there for several years doing those kind of car checking, you know. That's walking up and down trains writing down car numbers and that sort of stuff. Always at night. Going in behind the grain elevators and checking out the car numbers of all the grain cars and making sure they all match up.

EE: Did that eventually become computerized out of--?

RK: It did. It did, and it wasn't so much the computer as you understand it now. Back then it was the machinery, the IBM card printing machines and that sort of stuff. Ok, and collating machines.

EE: Yes.

RK: But that's what the railway got into. But they still needed employees to run the machines.

EE: Well, if you had a handheld device now—I would expect that may exist or whatever—you still probably have to go around and monitor them.

RK: Yeah. Back then it was most--. You'd get a checking paper and a lantern, and even back then it wasn't even a battery-operated lantern. It used to be a coal-oil lantern that you'd hold in your arms so you could write the numbers down. And of course, you smelt like coal-oil forever, your jackets and everything. Your parents didn't want you to bring those clothes in the house in the morning. But and then, you're right, then as you go--. As the railway was booming back then and the business was growing, they were expanding their car control and all that kind of stuff. Then I found myself taking a job as we called them "machine clerks," train machine clerks, and that's when you worked with all the data collector machines. It again, paid more than the other jobs, so a little bit more demanding because there was a lot of typing involved and that sort of stuff.

EE: Was this into the '70s by this time or did it happen earlier?

RK: I would say late '60s, '70s, in there. Yeah.

EE: Yeah.

RK: And that's when I made kind of a career change. Because the railway started really seven days a week, 24 hours a day over the entire city—back then two cities, Port Arthur and Fort William—they had a lot of employees in the outlying areas that needed some type of supervision. So they had what was called yardmasters, roving yardmasters. Those who were normally running trade, operating trade type of jobs—because you worked hand in hand with the switchmen et cetera—but they would take--. Well, if nobody applied for them, they'd have to take what they could take, right?

[0:10:40]

EE: Yeah.

RK: So, I applied for one of those jobs, not necessarily really sure I was going to get it because of my eyeglasses, but I did get it. And again, the company was starting to relax their restrictions on that, but once you get your foot in the door--. Because that's a significant pay increase.

EE: I can imagine.

RK: And from then, once you get your foot in the door in the operating end of the railway, it's a whole different type of a culture. Now you're involved in the actual making-up of the trains, you know, and dispersing them and distributing them. Pretty interesting.

EE: A lot less routine in a way, although, of course, there is the routine of what you're doing.

RK: Yeah, it was less, but it was kind of a--. How can I explain it? You got to see what railways actually did. It was something they didn't teach you in school. Everyone sees a train and how many of them think, "Well, how did they make that? I mean, there's 100 cars in that train. Where'd they come from? How did all that get done?" You know? Well, that's how I learned, and it was pretty interesting to see how it all got done, which cars go where when you're finished, which ones go to Winnipeg, which ones go to Moosejaw.

EE: And were you yourself involved in supervising the making up of the trains then?

RK: Yes, I was. The natural progression of the supervision levels back then was yardmaster, and then you went into they were called yard supervisors at that time. And they were in the trainyard right along Hardisty Street there in Fort William. That's where our big yard was. It was an office building run 24 hours a day with two or three supervisors because you were handling passenger trains, and freight trains, and yard movements at the same time. So you had three people lined up there with their microphones, and you'd be almost like an air traffic control, but it was ground traffic control. It was pretty stressful at points, you know, when you've got several movements coming through the city at the same time, and you have to keep them out of each other's way and that sort of thing.

EE: Yeah, from running into each other ultimately.

RK: Pardon?

EE: From running into each other ultimately. [Laughs]

RK: Absolutely. It was pretty good. And then from that--. This was kind of a quick rundown of how my career went. Then as the railway really started to push 24-hour a day grain unloading, seven days a week, they required a higher level of supervision because someone who not only supervises the crews but could sit down and sort out the logistics of where all this grain's going to go. And then they called those jobs assistant general yardmasters. Now, again, that was another increase in pay and higher level of responsibility because you've got--. You know, you're going to shove 100 cars in a grain elevator, you've got to make sure they're the right ones because the grain elevators aren't going to want you to go there the next day and take them out and put--.

EE: No, no. It's got to be right.

RK: Yeah. So these jobs, you applied for them after you garnered the experience of running around the city. You understood the city, you understood the grain elevators.

EE: The whole system.

RK: Not all every grain elevator handles the same commodity, that's another thing people had to learn. From the outside they look like a grain elevator, but from the inside it's different product, ok? So I applied for that job and got that job. And then the next step for me was the general yardmaster's job, which is what I worked right up until I retired. I never really was one of these employees who just saw myself going up, and I didn't market myself to go and become a vice-president. I was really happy and satisfied with running the department and running the city, and I took it personal, and I thought that's all I wanted. I just wanted to make it the most efficient terminal on the system—which I thought it was—and never really bothered to knock on the boss's door and say, "I want to go to Vancouver and become a general manager." You know?

[0:15:12]

EE: Right. When you took on this position, when was that roughly?

RK: That would have been in the early '80s.

EE: Which means that the busiest time in the waterfront, I guess, actually.

RK It was. It was. Right.

EE: And were you in charge of the whole yard then?

RK: Yeah. The general yardmaster's responsibility was every movement within the city from the airport to Current River. The boundaries outside those points would become a rail dispatcher's responsibility. Different signal systems and that sort of stuff.

EE: But that's just keeping them moving in a sense. The activity started here.

RK: Right. But the general yardmaster had a pretty good scope of responsibility there. You not only had to manage your own movements. But as you know, the Canadian National was also using Canadian Pacific's tracks from Intercity to Current River, and we had to sort all that out. It was a pretty good chunk of responsibility, but pretty interesting at the same time. You know? You handled all the rail crews, all the yard crews, and you worked in conjunction with the other departments—like the mechanical department, which back then I called the car department; the non-operating department, which is the customer service end of it. But you always had to work with them because you utilize their employees as your support staff. Like my secretary back then—was when we had secretaries—she actually was a non-operating employee, but she worked with the general yardmaster's department—pretty important jobs, I often say, you know? She handled all the hires and all the layoffs. She did all the paperwork.

EE: In that sort of hiring, the kind of hiring that you experienced in moving up, was that all largely done here in the city then?

RK: The hiring part of it?

EE: Or did Montreal get involved at all with--?

RK: You mean hiring employees et cetera?

EE: Advancing in the organization, the listing of positions and so on.

RK: Well, the way it works was the general yardmaster's level within the city, from then on in, the promotions were usually people who come--. The company believed in bringing people in from other areas, I suppose, to try to bring in a different objectivity and different ideas. So I like to tell people I had a new boss every two years. Now, if people don't think that's difficult, they should try it on because each one comes, and a new broom sweeps clean. Everyone that came wanted to say, "Ok. Now we're going to do things my way." So in the meantime, I've just been doing something that other guy's way, and so now you had to change with the new idea, but not totally. You didn't capitulate. You didn't just roll over.

EE: Debated the “why” of changes, I’m sure.

RK: I was kind of a stubborn guy there, so I would try to convince the new people that we’re not doing too bad the way we are, so don’t--. You know, we’ll change, but it was difficult. A lot of my bosses back then were promoted regularly to some pretty high positions—general managers, vice presidents, that sort of thing—and it was a stepping ground for them as they went through the different parts of the country, you know?

EE: It sounds as if CP Rail was involved in giving them experience of the system if they were in Thunder Bay for--. If someone was here for two years, then onto another position.

RK: Right.

EE: Or another place, they were becoming familiar with the whole system.

RK: Yeah.

EE: Whereas you were focused on running this part of the system as efficiently as you possibly could.

RK: Right, and they knew that. I can tell you in all honesty because Thunder Bay was heavily focused on grain through those years, the grain general managers and VPs, they selfishly—and I would have done the same thing—when they see they’ve got a good operation in the terminal, they really don’t want to change it. They knew that we knew what we were doing. And I was offered promotions to go to Moosejaw, to go to Coquitlam, to go to places like that. In hindsight after being retired for these years, I sit and talk to my wife sometimes and say, “I wonder if I should have done that.”

EE: What adventure did I miss, eh?

RK: Exactly. They were higher paid jobs and things like that. But you’ve got to understand that after working for a lot of years and finally getting your garden to grow the way you want it to grow, you know, you’re comfortable. And I’m not young anymore, and now they come and start asking you to take these jobs. I didn’t really want to go. If they had of asked me sooner, I might have, you know? Now, did I shoot myself in the foot by doing that? Probably because the higher ups at the railway, I don’t think they view that as a good company team player type of thing. If they offer you a promotion, they expect you to take it.

[0:20:40]

EE: I suppose.

RK: And I didn't. They never, ever--. Some of my bosses that I got to meet really personally, they'd tell me that they didn't want me to go. They'd come in from--. They'd bring somebody in here from Montreal who didn't know the front end of a grain car from the back end, but yet he ultimately was the big boss, and he knew that the guys knew what they were doing.

EE: Yes. What position, what title would that person have?

RK: Superintendent.

EE: Superintendents. Just one at a time?

RK: It's a good point, though, because the chain of command at the railway--. They like to publish the chain of command--the CEO and the vice-president and all of these--and then as it filters its way down, and each one is supposed to report to the, you know, how it goes.

EE: The one above them.

RK: So in my case, general yardmaster on paper, probably was supposed to report to the assistant superintendent who was supposed to report to the superintendent who would report to the general manager. But in reality, the superintendent would be phoning me and would be asking me to tell him and to communicate with him and send him--. And I wasn't going to refuse, you know? So it wasn't as if I just report to one guy and forget about it. There were people--general managers or managers--phoning me, and I wasn't the kind of guy to say, "Don't ask me. Ask the assistant super." I just went along with it, you know? No one's going to refuse the superintendent. If he tells you to do something, you're going to do it back then.

EE: Yeah. Well, that's the way things work.

RK: But that's what we had in Thunder Bay. We had a superintendent, an assistant superintendent for the terminal, and the general yardmaster in that order. And then, of course, I had all kinds of supervisors and coordinators who reported to me. The chain of command's not fair, by the way. It never was. On paper, I reported to an assistant superintendent, ok? And I was the only one that reported to him on the chain of command. Yet I had probably 20 subordinate officers reporting to me. So the balance was out of whack there somehow. "How come I've got 20 guys, but you only got me?" You know that sort of thing, but that's the way it was.

EE: We won't pursue the subject, but this is management structures can be explored at some length, I suppose.

RK: Yeah.

EE: I don't know where one would talk about middle management, and there have been those periods where companies have really reduced at that level. It's probably assistant and full superintendents that would be the middle management people here. I guess you had to have them, but the fact of the matter is that you as the general yardmaster were really running the system at the terminal.

RK: Yeah. In reality, that's the way it was. My name was at the bottom of all the bulletins, all the instructions, all the timetable instructions, on the bottom of all the hiring reports. The superintendent, I guess he reported--. At the end of the day, he would be the one to pick up the phone call and phone the general manager out west or the vice-presidents et cetera. These people, if they wanted to know something, wouldn't bother phoning me. They'd phone him. He'd ask me, or he'd send me there to a meeting or something like that.

EE: He may have spared you a lot of pain from above. [Laughs]

RK: No doubt, yeah. No doubt.

EE: People calling and pestering you while you were busy doing the job.

RK: Yeah.

EE: Keeping the system. Now, this is really very interesting. Was there a point in the early years when grain movement became clearly a part of--? Came onto your radar, maybe that's the best way of putting it. Because in that first year when you're awakening people in the cabooses and so on, it didn't really matter what the trains were doing.

RK: No. I see what you mean.

EE: At some point, however, the fact--.

RK: When did the light go on in my head and say, "This is really a grain industry."

EE: Well, I'm thinking of when you become--. Yeah, it could be that but also when you begin to deal with the movement of grain cars through the city and empties going back, of course.

RK: Ok. That's a good question. It's a fair question. When you start as a young rookie like that, and you start taking these jobs as they come—car checking and that sort of thing—you find yourself going to Westfort back in the day to where they had a hump yard there. It's not there any longer, but that's where you realized like, "What's a hump yard? Like what's it there for?" Well, all the grain coming from the west would be yarded in the arrival yard, that's the A yard in Westfort. All the grain back then would arrive in Westfort. And then in the morning, they'd sort it all out. They had about 40 tracks there at the bottom of the hump.

[0:25:39]

EE: Forty tracks?

RK: They were all--.

EE: Parallel tracks?

RK: Parallel tracks all holding around 25 to 35 cars each. And in the morning after everyone got their paperwork all together and everything, they'd have to start shoving these grain--. A grain train would arrive during the night with 100 cars, but those 100 cars would have to go onto maybe 50 different tracks because it wasn't all the same commodity. That's when I got my eyes opened a little bit in saying, "Well, that's what grain is." Like I thought grain was grain! I didn't know that it included barley and oats and wheat and durum. You know what I mean?

EE: Yeah. [Laughs] Fair enough! It's not just wheat. It could be different grades of wheat and whatnot.

RK: And it as a big part of the Thunder Bay operation that hump yard in Westfort because, don't forget, back then when I was hired, they had not yet gone into the car pooling. It was strictly grain-elevator directed. It would be loaded in the country for a certain elevator in Thunder Bay, and that's where we had to put it. It didn't matter whether it sat there for three weeks, you know? So I'm getting ahead of myself here, but back then it was demurrage if they sat around and that sort of thing.

EE: Demurrage, you had to pay? They charged the railway company for it?

RK: Yeah. Back then we had a demurrage department in Thunder Bay. If the grain companies—well, all the industries in Thunder Bay—if they didn't accept your cars within the three-day minimum, they were charged demurrage.

EE: So you charged the grain company for the fact that they weren't ready to take the car.

RK: Same thing. Right. And there was all kinds of waivers and that sort of thing, but it was not efficient in my opinion.

EE: No.

RK: The car pooling operation, that was what really brought in, I think, the efficiency to the grain operation in Thunder Bay. To be able to go and send these cars to an elevator that is maybe not--. See don't forget when these cars come in back then in the '60s and '70s, we had checkers who would go out there after they were humped, and you'd staple. You had a big stapler there and a big stack of cards, and you'd walk by all these cars, and they all had a wooden placard on them. And you'd put the little card there, and you'd staple it, and it would say "Pool 4A," and then you'd staple it, and it would say "P&H," and you'd staple it, and it would say, "Pool 7." And you'd walk and you'd say, "Well, jeez. We don't go to Pool 7, but I put it there anyway, ok?"

And then at the end of the day, as I was learning this job, you realize that your own company is bringing in a lot of grain cars that are supposed to go to a grain elevator that you don't even service! And you say, "Well, how the heck are we going to do that?" Well, that's when we had the exchange programs, and you'll hear that terminology as you interview the people. But it begged--.

EE: This is with the CNR and passing--?

RK: Exactly.

EE: The CNR served some and--.

RK: They were doing the same thing. They were probably bringing grain cars in to go to grain elevators that they didn't service. So we had this exchange program.

EE: Where did it take place, the physical exchange?

RK: Sure, sure. Well, depending on the grain elevators, back in the day—remember now, when I hired on there was probably 20-25 grain elevators here—so we'd exchange grain cars in Westfort. We had an exchange area there. It would be right along Neebing

Avenue. There's several tracks, they're exchange tracks. So we'd do a lot of exchanging there. We did them at Intercity. Intercity meaning in the Simpson-Sears area there, you know? If you go over the bridge there to that whole area, well we had a big exchange area there with the CNR, and we also had one in Current River. So we had three basic areas, and each of those areas—like, each of the three areas—each railway had their grain elevators in that area, but neither railway had exclusive switching rights to that area. Back then it was, “That’s my grain elevator. That’s yours. You service yours. I’ll service mine.” And again, we always, always saw room for improvement in that area too, you know? I mean, after all, a grain car is a grain car. They look the same.

[0:30:02]

EE: And the grain inside ultimately was regarded—aside from species and variety and grade— was regarded as interchangeable ultimately.

RK: Yeah. Right.

EE: It still required quite a bit of equipment. Yard locomotives, I suppose?

RK: Right. And there was, I would say back then, I would not--. I would say that it was not good utilization of equipment back then. There was too many cars sitting around. Like, I mean, grain would arrive in Thunder Bay all weekend, but the grain elevators wouldn't be unloading it until Monday morning. So it would just sit. And then if the grain elevators weren't unloading 24 hours a day, they could—let's say their capacity was 100 cars a day and they had all these other cars—these cars would sit until the next day and the next day, next day. So it was a process of organizing the people to understand that you've got to get through. It's got to be a seven-day operation, it's got to be a round-the-clock operation. Not only for the grain elevators, but for every department because you needed the mechanical department, everybody, to work with you to get these things moving.

EE: And so at a specific point in time it did become--?

RK: It did.

EE: A seven-day week?

RK: It did. It did. And I think the--.

EE: Do you remember when that was?

RK: Well, I can't remember the year, but it was with the pooling, with the grain pooling arrangement, and that would have come with the GTA, the Grain Transportation Agency in Thunder Bay. Originally Mr. Menzes--.

EE: Early to mid-'70s?

RK: Pardon?

EE: Early to mid-'70s, then, I guess.

RK: Right. That really streamlined it. Because what we did, we basically gave this agency the license--.

EE: The authority.

RK: To tell both railways and grain elevators where these grain cars were going to go, you know? Not negatively to the statement of, "Whether you like it or not," but we had to put trust in the GTA. And it worked. Because at the end of the day, the grain cars didn't sit around. And both railways had the problem of car utilization, and keep in mind, we were busy during the summer, but so were the American railways. So to get these hopper cars that we had to lease et cetera, there was probably a big demand for the Americans to use them also at the time. So there was a shortage of hopper cars and--.

EE: So Americans wanted to borrow and did borrow our rolling stock, did they?

RK: Well, the thing is, when we leased cars, we leased a lot of them from the Americans, but if they were busy, there were less available for us to lease.

EE: Of course.

RK: You see? So we kept an eye on that, and it was difficult. But there was other departments in the railway who really take care of that stuff, but we were involved in it. To me, the pooling arrangement in Thunder Bay as far as grain now—and that's what we're talking about—that streamlined it for both railways.

EE: It saved the companies demurrage charges as well, I guess, eh?

RK: Oh, it just changed everything. To my mind, the railways were responsible for bringing the grain cars in, but they never really had any push on outward shipping. Like we never really had any control of vessels, lake vessels.

EE: No, no.

RK: We never really had any control telling the grain elevators what to do or the dock workers, et cetera. But when the GTA formed in Thunder Bay, and when we started having regular grain meetings with both railways and all the players—we can get into that too—but they made an arrangement where we met weekly. We had a representation from the shipping industry, from the grain elevators industry, from the railway industry, so that when you put all your data on the table, I not only could see where the grain cars were going to get unloaded, you could also see how it was going to marry up with the outward shipping. Because if you didn't have that, then the elevators would plug up, you know? So to me, that really streamlined it.

And again, Ernie, we were just getting out of the boxcar business and heavily into the hopper car business then. Don't get me wrong, we still had a lot of boxcars coming through Thunder Bay because a lot of the grain elevators still had the boxcar unload operation.

EE: This is here in the terminals?

RK: Right. Exactly. It was not as streamlined as the hopper cars. They didn't hold as much grain as the hopper car, and it was more labour intensive. Same thing with maintenance, the boxcars were old. So both railways gradually eliminated them.

[0:35:04]

EE: It's very interesting to think about all of this. There was a lot of competition, different companies operating. So on the face of it, you'd think there was a good deal of competition, and I suppose there was. Two railway companies, however, a number of grain companies—some of them, of course, farmer owned—different shipping lines, ships from various countries. But when you gathered round the table, the competitive considerations largely disappeared. It's a matter of throughflow isn't it? Organizing that, and it didn't really matter very much—matter at all—where the grain had come from, who was moving the grain. It all had to be fit together without creating any kind of bottleneck, which I guess it had been in a way under the previous form of holding of storage of cars. This is very interesting to think about.

RK: Yeah. And factor in that Thunder Bay, it was a seasonal terminal. At the end of the summer and as shipping started to slow down and then as the cold weather started approaching, the focus had to be, ok, the elevators are going to fill up, and then when

they fill up and the lake freezes over and there's no shipping, then you have to slow down the flow of traffic into this Thunder Bay. And we did. And there were years where we had to stage it because it was staged in Kenora and Ignace and Raith and Kam and every place where there was a siding, you'd stage it all winter. But--.

EE: So there'd be cars sitting out there? Staging is what you mean?

RK: They just sit there all winter and wait until navigation opened up.

EE: Empty, or were some of these--?

RK: Loaded with grain cars.

EE: Loaded with grain.

RK: Because the grain coming off the farmers' fields would flow. Like they could still load grain cars in the wintertime because they had it in their own personal silos and in their storage facilities, ok? You understand?

EE: Elevators at the country points.

RK: Yeah. And as long as there was grain car availability because that's how they made their money--.

EE: You could actually fill them all up? [Laughs]

RK: Fill them all up. Then that's basically what happened. The railways would lay off a lot of their staff and everything would slow right down. We'd still have a lot of the mainline traffic.

EE: I was wondering about your job.

RK: Well, there was a lot of layoffs. It was up and down. If I had a graph here, it was like you'd hire all summer, and you'd lay off, and you'd hire them back, and you'd lay off. Now, a lot of your regular employees would come back, some of them would get fed up with this layoff/hire back and would leave and go elsewhere, some of them stuck it out.

EE: Would they be covered effectively by the UI [Unemployment Insurance] arrangements up to mid-'90s?

RK: Well, again, my secretary, one of her primary responsibilities was to be providing work records for these kids that I would be laying off, and they would be lined up at my door. I can just remember it so clearly. There'd be bunches of them lined up waiting for their work records because they had to march down to the UIC building--.

EE: Yeah. The Unemployment Insurance Commission.

RK: And claim--. And they had to prove their benefits.

EE: Demonstrate how long they worked.

RK: I can't remember the exact, but they had to have so much contributions to get their--.

EE: Yes, of course.

RK: But then with the GTA and the pooling system, they advanced to what we called all-rail shipping during the winter. A lot of export shipping. We got into that. I can't remember the exact--. It was probably in the late '70s. That really, to my way of thinking, that really helped things because now we got into--. We didn't lay off. I just loved that export movement, to tell you the truth.

EE: Yeah, I daresay.

RK: Because I started asking about it in October. I'd ask the experts out west, "Is there going to be a rail movement this year? Is there going to be a rail movement this year?" And they knew probably, because I'd tell them why I wanted to know. I said, "Because if you can just keep me abreast of it because I don't want to lay all my kids off and then have you tell me, 'Hey, we're going to have a rail movement.' I'd rather keep them, and I'd rather slow things down and sort out my yard assignments knowing that we were going to run all winter. Ok?" And I could pass that information onto the other departments. Because--.

EE: Did you run through the winter more often than not or most years? Or how did it go?

RK: Well, once the export business took off, and what I mean by that is we'd have a--. We were loading instead. Typically, Thunder Bay's an unload terminal, but the export meant that we would be spotting hundreds and hundreds of hopper cars here locally. We'd be loading them with grain and then running trains down east, all rail.

[0:40:07]

EE: Yeah. To--?

RK: To Quebec and to Port Cartier and to the Montreal grain elevators all along the St. Lawrence Seaway there. Baie Comeau. Wherever there was a rail line into one of those grain elevators, that's where we'd run our export trains.

EE: Now Montreal would freeze up, I imagine, Quebec City as well, but further down the St. Lawrence I guess they operated all year round, did they?

RK: I'd say probably around Sept-Iles, Port Cartier, you know, up in there where you're getting close to the Gaspé Peninsula.

EE: Yes, where the gulf is opening up.

RK: You get salties in there all year.

EE: Yes.

RK: And some of those big salties, they take maybe three times what a grain boat that we normally see here.

EE: Sure. What the lakers can carry.

RK: But when you think of it, just think what that did to the rail operation. It not only kept us running all winter, we're running trains all the way, say, to Montreal. Now that meant that Schreiber had to keep crews available all winter, White River, and you take all those change-off points all the way down there that they're now going to be running 100-car grain trains that they've never seen before. And I have to tell you that these grain trains were powered by five SD-40 units.

EE: Diesel locomotives.

RK: The people down east, they weren't used to running trains like this. I mean, that's a heavy, heavy lift when the weather is 20 below, you know what I mean?

EE: Yes.

RK: So there was a pretty large learning experience the first couple of years doing this.

EE: It must have saved the UI fund a pile of money through those years. [Laughs]

RK: Well, it did.

EE: Because these guys weren't being laid off.

RK: You know, when you look in car turnaround alone, if somebody was to ask you if you were to figure out a car turnaround on a rail car, where would you start the clock, ok? Now, if I asked you two gentlemen that—you'd probably know because you've been interviewing these people, but it's interesting. I'd ask people that and they wouldn't have a clue. And I'd say, "Well, ok."

EE: Surely you start at the Prairie point.

RK: I'd say, "You start right underneath the farmer's spout."

EE: Yeah, at the Prairie elevator.

RK: I says, "The minute he puts the grain in that car, push the button on the stop clock because now you've got to get that car to the grain elevator, unload it, and back again." Now that--. Some of the car turnaround was two weeks.

EE: Really?

RK: You stop and think now. Winnipeg or Brandon or these places would have to send a rail crew out and fetch those cars every day, bring them in, wait until they get enough gathered up for a train. Then they'd have to run the train to the destination—in this case we're talking Thunder Bay—and then what happens in Thunder Bay, and back. Keep thinking, back in those days before when the cars just sat around here waiting for the grain elevators to open, it wasn't hard to think that these sit around for two weeks. Well, once we started pooling grain cars, and once we started running 24-hours a day, seven days a week, there were times when we'd get a grain train in from Thunder Bay let's say at 8:00 in the morning—Thunder Bay—and without exaggeration, that same 100 cars would probably be on the move back west at midnight. Now, that meant that they would have to get into a grain elevator, unload it, gather it up at the end of the day, brought back to the departure yard in Westfort. Maintenance had to be applied to these cars—you know, springs and air brakes and that sort of thing. They had a full maintenance operation in Westfort. So that took time

to do all of that, but we could do that in less than 24 hours. So you'd have that same grain train heading back west within 24, 36 hours.

EE: In that case, the turnaround could be within a week I suppose, actually, then?

RK: Oh, absolutely. But just think of the money saved in that alone.

EE: Yes. Or the quantity of grain that was moved by a set number of hopper cars.

RK: And the less demand for leasing that amount. Because you'd lease hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of cars. Now at the end of the season, now you're not utilizing these cars much, so now you want to get them back to the lease company. If you're going to store cars in Kenora and Ignace or wherever all year, you don't want them to be the leased cars, you want them to be your CP cars, right? So the logistics was mind-boggling sometimes.

[0:45:10]

EE: Yeah, I can well imagine.

RK: So you can imagine why when they transfer a superintendent to Thunder Bay, let's say, who comes from an area who had no idea about grain, how would he know all this logistical stuff? You know what I'm saying? He wouldn't know it.

EE: You made life easy for a lot of different executives moving up! [Laughs]

RK: Exactly. And it's no disrespect to these gentlemen, but it was complicated.

EE: It all has to be learned, and it is complicated.

RK: Then that took me right up to the--. Like we were pooling cars and unloading cars right up until I'd say the late '80s. When things started to shift, when the grain started to be sold out of the West Coast to the Pacific, to the--. Because it's all about who's buying the grain, ok?

EE: Yeah. Pacific Rim countries.

RK: When I hired on the railway in the '60s, the boats coming in here were English boats and Polish boats and Russian boats, ok, and German boats. I get on these boats and meet these people, and they couldn't speak English. But that's who was buying the grain back then. But over the years, I guess a lot of those countries learned and learned from us, and we taught them how to grow grain and how to support themselves.

EE: Became self-sufficient.

RK: So the demand lessened, and I could see it shifting to head out Pacific Rim to China and places like that. And that was going to hurt Thunder Bay big time because, you know, I mean we all know what happened to the grain handlers in Thunder Bay. They've gone down from thousands of workers to hundreds et cetera. But I saw that coming. Then all through the years, the grain elevators rationalized. They had some of the older grain elevators in Westfort. They weren't really mechanized properly, and it would have cost a lot of money to get them up to speed, so that's when they started dropping off, closing down, and their main elevator would just pick up the slack.

EE: Well, I'm thinking that as soon as the elevator has one or more—as the main elevators with 24-hour a day operations seven days a week—that would shift a lot of the throughput into the most efficient elevators.

RK: Absolutely.

EE: Say, Sask Pool or whoever each of them owned, and that would be reason enough for dropping the ones that were less efficient. Just not up to state of the art.

RK: Exactly. Exactly. And you factor in a few other little things like getting these big boats up the Kam River, underneath these bridges, the Jackknife Bridge. Had to dredge the Kam River because right along the infamous CNR bridge that we no longer can use, ok, well that bridge was operational. We had to get boats up and down there all the time to get to a bunch of these grain elevators. Then, of course, that all went by the wayside. But then when the coal terminal opened up on the island in Thunder Bay, it also became more than just a coal terminal. It was a bulk unloading facility, so they started handling grain also, which was--.

EE: So I've heard. [Laughs]

RK: Well, it just to me, it helped the system because it was the throughput, you know? Pushing as much through for the farmers as you could out of Thunder Bay in a season, which meant the less amount that you had to store all winter. But then again, that grain had to be--. It just couldn't be just--. It had to be 100 cars of one commodity. I mean, you're not going to put 100 different

commodities into a grain boat, so you have to. So instead of that grain boat going to a big elevator in Thunder Bay and loading up with all the right, the one commodity, we had to bring it in that way. But then again, as we were streamlining in Thunder Bay, they were streamlining out west. They were building these big mega grain elevators, as you know.

EE: Inland terminals.

EE: And they were loading grain cars there quicker than they ever could, ever would. And they start selectively figuring out the commodities that they were sorting out over there. They start doing a lot of the work out there that they used to do here, stuff like drying and sorting and that sort of stuff. So I guess it was a good thing, but it also affected Thunder Bay.

EE: It changed things here. Yes.

RK: Yeah. And then when it did shift, now you're stuck with the problem of, ok, now what do you do? Now you've got all this infrastructure here, are you going to use it again? Now, I've talked to railway—I won't mention their names—but some of my bosses. They just told me, they said, "Forget it." The words they used were they said, "Once we're done here in Thunder Bay, it's done. It will never come back." And that's the words they used to use. And of course, I joke and say, "Never say never. Things will change."

[0:50:32]

EE: No. Because they're in the service business. They don't decide, ultimately, where grain is going to move, who's going to buy it, and so on. Whether it will make sense to move it through Atlantic ports, they don't know that, and that's what--. But I can see from their own plans, it just doesn't look as if that's going to happen. That's what they're saying.

RK: Yeah. And their heart wouldn't be where my heart was. Don't forget, I was born here, raised here, family here, worked at the railway my entire life. My heart was there. Dedicated, you know what I'm saying?

EE: Of course, it was.

RK: I didn't want to see it leave Thunder Bay. I didn't want it to go to Vancouver. But in reality, that's what was going to happen.

EE: Well, that's a terrific sketch of things. There are various pieces within that that we can talk about further, and we surely will because the questionnaire is still here.

RK: Sure.

EE: But one of the detailed areas is this matter of humping. You might just describe that process.

RK: The humping?

EE: I'm a kid at heart in some ways, you know? Big boys with big machines and big toys. My sense of this is somewhat influenced by the development of the Symington yards in Winnipeg. I was at the UofM in the early 60s when I think that yard was being built up. Humping is quite a physical process, isn't it?

RK: It is, and we didn't have the real mechanized humping operation like some of these big Symington--.

EE: Like the Symington yards in Winnipeg.

RK: Yeah. Ours was strictly physical. When I say "hump", the trains would arrive in Westfort in what we called A yard, and it was a flat arriving yard. It was about 15 tracks, and they all held about 75 cars a piece. At the east end of that yard, the ground physically sloped down into C yard—which was the classification yard—where all these cars as they got humped went over this hill and then gravity flowed into the various tracks. Now on every one of the cars that went down there, we put a hump rider. That was a switchman, a rider. We'd call him a hump rider. He'd climb up, and he'd get his hands on that brake wheel, and away we--. We let him go over the hump, and he'd ride the car into the track to the furthest point, and as he got there, hopefully, he'd tie the handbrake and stop the car. And he'd walk back and get another and walk back. And he did that all day. We'd have maybe ten of them doing that all day.

EE: And of course, the cars were being moved by a locomotive that was pushing them slowly.

RK: They were pushed by a locomotive about two miles an hour, walking speed. They had a fellow out there with what looked like a cane with a hook on it et cetera. What he was doing was he had a sheet of paper that the yardmaster would give him, and the sheet of paper would say, "Ok, these next two cars, pull the pin—in other words release those two cars—and they're going to go onto track ten."

EE: And you had to have switchmen to direct?

RK: So what we had, we had a fellow up operating--. We had electrical switches just at the west end of the yard.

EE: Ah. Sure.

RK: We didn't have electrical switches on all the tracks, so what we had, we had a guy who could flick a switch and send the cars that direction, but we also had to have another switch tender down there to physically align to get it into a specific track. Ok? So you had hump riders, you had switch tenders, you had your locomotive, you had your head-end man. Don't forget now too, that locomotive engineer, he had to have a switchman on his engine because we'd tell him to back up and maybe--.

EE: Onto another track.

RK: So he needed somebody to go out and line the switches for him at the west end of A yard.

EE: To move the--. To get the--.

RK: So there was a lot of people employed in Westfort. And it was a noisy operation. *Boom!* Can you imagine? You're sending cars over, and you're running down 30 car lengths, and depending on how efficient that rider was, how quickly he--. I mean, we had a lot of cases there where the cars would run out the back end. And I've got to tell you this story, Ernie. It's a true story. The cabooses were still in operation back then, but we had yard caboose, transfer cabooses. They looked like a regular caboose, but they were older, and they were less equipped, and they basically just allowed the switch crews to have shelter as they rode a transfer of cars to Port Arthur and back, let's say. And at the end of the day, a lot of them were stored in Westfort there for the next day, and they were stored at the east end of these tracks that we were going to hump cars into. But if you didn't pay attention and you didn't remind the hump riders, "Hey, there's a lightweight caboose at the other end of that track. Be careful!" So every now and then, someone would forget.

[0:55:47]

EE: Wasn't looking, or could they see?

RK: Wasn't paying attention. It happens. And I remember one morning there, we let a string of about eight hopper cars go over the hill into this track not knowing a caboose was down there, and those hopper cars flattened that caboose to firewood. The noise was just deafening, and when I went down there and took a look at it, I thought I was going to get fired. I said, "How the heck could that

happen?" Ok. But it could happen very easily. Five- or ten-hundred tonne hopper cars, that's a lot of weight they're slamming into that 15-tonne wooden caboose, you know?

EE: Yeah. Because the--.

RK: But we were in the process of eliminating cabooses back then, so. [Laughing]

EE: So the end of the line came to an end with whatever those steel structures--?

RK: Ok, but all those tracks, keep in mind too--.

EE: Or did the tracks continue?

RK: They continued because we're humping from an arrival yard into a classification yard. Now that classification yard had tracks at the east end because every morning, we'd send yard engines to gather up those grain cars on the curve there in Westfort, make them into a grain transfer, and take them to Port Arthur or Current River or wherever you want to go.

EE: To the appropriate elevator.

RK: Right. And it was just a bend there. There was an old Westland Elevator D there at that time. But all the tracks curved there, so you had to pay attention to that, you know, the fouling points and--.

EE: And the caboose had been braked, so the brakes held and the cars ruined it, destroyed it?

RK: Yeah, exactly.

OM: Was there a hump rider on those hopper cars?

RK: Well, they'd get off before they'd--. The idea was that you wouldn't stay right on—I mean you could—but you'd slow your car down, and you'd look ahead, and you'd see that there was enough cars there that your car would couple, and it would--. You trained your people that at the beginning of the morning there when you started off, the first two or three or four cars that you put into that yard, you'd tie hand brakes on them to secure them, and then you'd walk back. Ok? Well, as humans will do, instead of

four hand brakes, sometimes they tie on three or maybe two, and maybe not tight enough. You know, you can't be down there to watch everybody every minute of the day.

EE: And people will be people! [Laughs]

RK: Sometimes things got loosey-goosey down there, you know? Also, we got so busy, we would hump around the clock. I would get calls from people who lived in Westfort—I'm the general yardmaster—and my first call in the morning, 8:00 in the morning, well, 7:00 in the morning. I was one of these guys who went to work 6:30 in the morning and just loved it, like I kid you not.

EE: Where was your office?

RK: Well, we had the Westfort hump yard was a three-storey building that the top two floors was the yardmaster's, general yardmaster's operation, and the bottom was for the mechanical department.

EE: So that was where you were based?

RK: The company bounced me back and forth. There was a period of time where I was at the depot in Fort William, the Thunder Bay Train Station. There was a period of time I was there—there's a story behind that, too. Then there's another period of time that I was in Westfort. But it was best for the general yardmaster to be right in the middle of the operation.

EE: Yeah. I can imagine. So you'd get calls?

RK: Exactly. And I did. Now there's people who live in Westfort their entire life and they know that it's noisy in the daytime and everything, but they didn't realize that there was going to be humping cars at 4:00 in the morning. They didn't understand and, of course, I wasn't going to give them this history lesson at 8:00 in the morning when they phone and complain. I try to say, "You know, we're a 24-hour a day operation." And they want us to not do that, ok?

[1:00:03]

EE: Yeah, well, of course they wouldn't! [Laughs]

RK: And they'd be phoning their aldermen, and I'd be getting calls from--. It wasn't Virdiramo back then it was--.

EE: Sterling Lysnes?

RK: Exactly. That's who it was.

EE: I know Sterling's place.

RK: Sterling was a pretty sharp guy.

EE: He was.

RK: He knew what was going on.

EE: Yeah, he understood what you were doing, but his constituents wouldn't understand.

RK: Yeah. But you understand we were evolving, ok? And you know, when I think back, perhaps I should have done a better job with the media and maybe with the city, but I was too busy to think of that. And I have lots of time to think now. But I should have maybe got the media involved or the city, and said, "Hey, we're shifting focus. We're going to start doing work at night."

EE: Let's kick over to the GTA. The GTA should have explained because this was GTA.

RK: Well, somewhat. We didn't think of it back then. There's all kinds of things we could have done different that I can think of now that I've got nothing better to do all day long but think about all these things. But I wish I had thought of them then. It would have helped. I would have helped, because the relationship between the railway and the citizens of Westfort--.

EE: It maybe helped a little bit, but in Westfort to explain that this was marvellously efficient 24-hour a day, seven days a week operation wouldn't help very much. You could have ordered earplugs I suppose.

RK Yeah. There was people along Westfort who understood it, though. There was a lot of--. Keep in mind, a lot of my workers lived in Westfort, and it was their livelihood, you know? But--.

EE: Once when I was MP back, I think, it was in '88—the election was approaching and so on—and I actually took the time to pick up a Henderson's directory and begin flipping through it noting who lived where, grain handlers and railway workers. And not

surprisingly, railway workers were preponderant on the south side. Grain handlers were more preponderant in my riding, Thunder Bay-Nipigon at the time.

RK: See now, we've pretty well covered, let's say, my career up to a point. Like remember I was telling you, you couldn't ask for a more dedicated employee than I was. Seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I spent Christmases and New Years and birthdays and anniversaries on the job. No complaints. No complaints, that was my life.

EE: Really? How long a day did you work then? If you were there by 6:30, when did you leave?

RK: 5:00, 5:30. It got to--.

EE: So 11 hours.

RK: It got nasty, Ernie, and we can put this on tape. The railway shifted, and as the old time CEOs and everything retired, they started getting these young whippersnappers in there.

EE: MBAs.

RK: And in my case, there was a young whippersnapper—and I'm going to use his name because it's been in the media the last couple years—but the demise of Bobby Kaplanis came with the arrival of Fred Green. And he was a general manager, very young. I had more year's seniority on the railway than he had years.

EE: Of life?

RK: Of life, ok? Now this man is going to--. He wants to reinvent the wheel.

EE: He's going to make his mark.

RK: Well, exactly. But back at that time, I was just focused on, "Let's get this terminal running like a Swiss clock, ok?" So what he did, he didn't want to be general manager. He wanted to be the CEO.

EE: President of the company?

RK: Right. And I guess for him to do that at his level, he probably had to come up with reasons that the stockholders wanted to buy stock in CP Rail.

EE: Something he could tell the board of directors about.

RK: Well, here's what he did. He went and hired a team of psychiatrists in Vancouver. This man was from Vancouver. So I got a call from my superintendent one day saying, "You're not going to like this, but just hear me out." He says, "We're bringing in a team of psychiatrists." And I said, "Why?" And I didn't even finish. I said, "You're what?" Now keep in mind, I had been there a long time already, ok? And so I'm not polished. I never took 101 Fence Walk. One of my faults was I was black and white. I wasn't good with grey. When someone tells me they're bringing in a team of psychiatrists, "Ok, to do what?" "Well, they're going to rethink the way we're running the railroad. And just hear me out. Hear me out. Just go along with it."

EE: I'm trying to here, Bob. Lay it on me. [Laughing]

RK: So they brought them in. Now I had to tell my men, my subordinates et cetera, that this was happening, and they did the same thing I did. "They're what?" And I was also nervous that this Fred Green guy, if we don't go along with him, he'll fire us. Because you see we were company office. I had no union to back me up. Well, they bring these people in. Well, you know what, they weren't psychiatrists.

[1:05:13]

EE: That wouldn't have made sense for--.

RK: So then the boss says, "Well, they're psychologists." Well, they weren't psychologists either.

EE: What were they?

RK: They were four ladies in Vancouver who took a psychology course and opened up a business called Advantage, and they were going to reinvent how companies should run their business. They were going to change the thinking. Now they sold their idea to this Fred Green man. Why he chose my terminal, I'll never know. Of all the railways, of all the areas, but he chose mine. I have some feelings why he did it.

EE: Where was he based? Not in--.

RK: Vancouver.

EE: In--. I see.

RK: He's a high up guy now, ok? And his territory is from Vancouver to Thunder Bay. That's his territory.

EE: Ok. So the two most distant parts. [Laughs]

RK: Right. So now I'm being told to go along with this and keep my mouth shut et cetera, and I did my best. I did my best. But, Ernie, I can tell you, this team come to Thunder Bay, and they would come up to me and they'd say, "We don't think you should run a 24-hour day operation." And I'd say--.

EE: Why not?

RK: "Well, then when should I run these trains?" "Well, we don't think people should have to work at midnight." "Oh." "We don't think people should have to work Saturday and Sunday." "Oh." I was just--. I didn't know what to say to them. I'd say, "Well--."

EE: It's company policy.

RK: "Then when should we run all these trains?" And I'm thinking it's my--. The fellow that hired him, does he know this? So now this team of psychologists, they felt the pushback. They felt that I wasn't--. Like I just didn't buy in, ok? But think of this though. I'm 50 years of age. I've been there 35 years. I'm not going to buy into that unless someone tells me that the company no longer wants to be a 24-hour day operation.

EE: Yeah. I mean, if Fred Green told you you had to operate for eight hours a day and not on weekends--.

RK: Exactly, but he didn't. So I did the right thing. I go to my superintendent, right, in Thunder Bay and I say--. Because he doesn't know. He just told me to go along with this. So I go to him and say, "Do you actually see what's going on here now?" So I explain to him. Now, Ernie, he was in a real bugaboo now because he thought, "Uh-oh. What do I do?" He told me that to my face. If he agreed with me, then his job would be on the line. So he told me, he says, "Well, can't you just go along with it?" I said, "You realize what they want me to do? They want me to give everybody Saturday and Sunday off, and nobody work--." I says, "You're the boss. How do I run trains? What do I tell the people in Toronto? That their train with all their car parts on it is going to sit here

in Thunder Bay until Monday? That's if I can even fit it in here somewhere." So he gave me no advice whatsoever other than to please try to--. Ok? [EE laughs] So I go back to--.

EE: Well, some things you can't "please try." Not when it's a 24-hour operation, seven days a week.

RK: No. Now understand, at my level I'm worried about it, but my subordinates they figure, "Hey, we get--. No skin off our rear end. If they want us to play this, let's do it." So they go to these meetings, and these psychologists would say to these people, "Do you guys like working Friday?" "No, we don't like working Friday. "Then you shouldn't have to." So then they didn't go to work. So then the next day I go to work, and I get these reports that say, "So-and-so didn't show up for work last night." So I get a hold of so-and-so and he'd say, "Well, those girls told me not to go to work." I'm telling you this is what was going on, ok?

So then I call a meeting with these Advantage group, and I say, "This is not working." The leader of the pack, she told me, she says, "If you don't cooperate with us, we're going to get you fired." Now she said it loud enough that the fellow in the hallway heard it. Because these girls now, I guess, they contracted out to CP Rail for whatever lump sum of money, whatever, and for whatever time period. Now, if I'm not cooperating it's going to affect their business. But to make a long story short, it got back to this Fred Green guy.

EE: And what did he do?

[1:10:00]

RK: Fred Green now, he had already convinced his boss, which was probably the vice-president, "I've got this great idea, and we're going to get--." And his thinking was this. Here's his thinking, "We don't need supervision on CP Rail. All we need is employees because the employee, he doesn't need Bobby Kaplanis to tell him what to put in a grain elevator in Current River. We'll just tell him, 'Gather up whatever cars you can and take them over there, and then go walk up to the grain elevator and shake their hand.'" This is his thinking. "And say, 'How are you doing? I'm so and so, and I've got all my grain cars here today. But before we--. Let's have a little meeting.'" It was mind boggling.

I was getting calls from general managers of the grain elevators saying, "Are you guys for real?" I mean, and now I'm at a point where I'm thinking, "I'm going to lose my job. I'm going to lose my job." So the general manager, Fred Green—the guy I'm telling you about—flew me to Vancouver. My boss told me, he says, "You've got to go to Vancouver to see him." He flew me to Vancouver to tell me to my face to cooperate. Do what these girls want me to do. Like he did. And I said to him, I says, "I'm trying

to, but I can't do my job and do--." I said, "I just don't work that way." I said, "I can't. How can I run Thunder Bay Monday to Friday, no night shifts, all the goofy ideas that these--."

So he basically--. Here's the straw that broke the camel's back. They not only were going to reinvent the wheel. She contacted me one day and she said, "We're going to have a meeting at the Red Oak Inn, and you're going to invite all your people there, and we're going to sit you in a chair at the front of the hall, and we're going to put a bag over your head." And I said, "Wait a sec. Wait a sec. Wait." I said, "Are you for real?" They were for real. They were going to put a bag over my head at the front of this hall at the Red Oak Inn, and this was supposed to—in their mind because of this psychology—this was supposed to break any perceived bond or barrier there was between management and worker. And they were giving me all this nonsense.

EE: They were going to free the workers to damn you, I suppose?

RK: Well, you know what? I says, "No, you're not." I said, "I'm not going." I said, "If you want to fire me, fire me." I said, "I'm not going up there and putting a bag over my head." I said, "Last week you told me you were going to make me a better husband." I says, "What part of my working on the rail--?"

EE: Did she actually say that?

RK: They did, yeah. So I said, "What part of my working on the railway--? Where did I sign up that the railway was going to--?" I says, "It's none of your business what kind of--. You want to know what kind of husband I am?" I says, "My wife knows what kind of husband I am." I says, "None of your business." It got to that point. Then Fred Green contacted my superintendent and told him to fire me. So he called me in and he says, "What am I going to do?" And I said, "Well then, I'm going to go off on sick." I said, "My pension's paid up."

A paid-up pension at the railway is 35 years, as you guys know or maybe you don't. Ok, so I had it in. So at least they couldn't take that from me. But I was intending, when my pension was paid up, I was intending on staying there for a few years. I was still young et cetera because those last--. My pension is based on my best five earning years, which are normally your last five earning years, which would have been mine. But I could not have done it. I mean, I was coming home, I was pretty stressed out, and I'm not that type of an individual. But I was coming home, and my wife was feeling it. She knew, and she was begging me, she says, "Can you just fence walk? Can you--." And I says, "I never took that 101 course or whatever it was." I said, "I never took it. I don't know how to do this."

EE: You've got to keep the grain moving damn it!

RK: So I kid you not what I did, and I said to my boss, I says, “Ok.” Because he was basically on my side, the superintendent. He was really in a dilemma. I knew it. And they were putting pressure on him, and everybody knew this was stupid. Ernie. I was getting phone calls from people all over out west who heard what was going on in Thunder Bay. And they were general yardmasters like me deathly afraid that after me they were next. And they were praying, “Can you hang on? Can you hang on? Can you hang on?” Well, what happened, the rumour got to the higher executives, and they call this Fred Green in, and they said, “We want an independent review of this group that you hired.”

[1:14:51]

So they brought in a bunch of supposedly objective, independent, higher up railway officials to Thunder Bay, and they spent about three weeks, and they interviewed every single person about this group. And you know what the result was? “Fire those psychologists. Never hire them again at CP Rail.” Ok? Well, guess what? Fred Green, he’s got egg on his face now. He didn’t like this. This report—this neutral, objective report—told him, “This is a bad idea.” But he’s not going to go and admit this. He’s not that kind of man. But they got rid of them. Everybody was so happy, everything. My boss called me in, and guess what he said to me? Guess. He come up to me, the first thing he said, “*Clap*. Well, we want you to just get everything back the way it was.” It’s 8:00 in the morning. I says, “Ok.” I said, “I’ll try my darndest.” I says, “But I don’t think I can do that in one day.”

EE: They stirred up a lot of sedition in the ranks.

RK: There was a lot of damage.

EE: Oh, yeah.

RK: My authority was threatened by that time. There were people who had quit. It was nasty, nasty. Well, this Fred Green, he still wanted me fired.

EE: Yeah, of course he would.

RK: Because he went from that, he went to vice-president. So then his next idea, he said, “Ok. I want to abolish every single job there is there. And just abolish it.” It was a restructure.

EE: Reinvent the place, eh?

RK: So now, in other words, my job was eliminated, and if I wanted another job, just bid in on it.

EE: Yeah, you'd have to apply.

RK: It might be somewhere or whatever the place may be. So what happened, they put the dates out et cetera, and they just started abolishing jobs. So I contacted a few people out west, and I said, "What do you think is going to happen?" He says, "Well, they're abolishing your job, and we've all been told you're not part of the plan." That's how he was going to get rid of me, eh? So I went to my boss and I said, "Ok. It's time. I've got to go. I'm--." So they bridged me for the remainder of the year, and I took my pension and left. Now, this Fred Green, guess what? The CP Rail, he became CEO, and then a year and a half ago—you may have read it in the papers—he's the one that they got rid of.

EE: Oh, this is the fellow who was replaced by Hunter Harrison?

RK: Right. Right. The shareholders had enough of this. The man was--. Now, I got a couple phone calls saying, "Did you hear what happened?" Now I don't know how you think I should feel over a thing like that.

EE: But he lasted about 16 years.

RK: He got \$17 million. \$17 million to leave.

EE: How old would he be now? 55?

RK: I'd say not even 60.

EE: Not even 60.

RK: Now he ruined my career, ruined a good ten years of my career there, ok? I left the railway, never got an email, never got a phone call from any of the executives, "Thank you for your 38 years of service." Nothing! Because of that man. He put the fear of God in so many people there. Now in fairness--.

EE: Because the efficiency of the company must have dropped in those years. They must have--. I don't know if they lost money or--.

RK: Think how I would feel now. I've gone under those conditions—not happy—I'm living in this city, so everywhere I go I will bump into somebody who's involved in this business. I know everybody, and then they would tell me things like, "You wouldn't believe. You wouldn't believe what we did at Pool 4 yesterday. We went and gave them all Pool 7's grain. So now we had the next-. So the grain guys come and said, 'What? This isn't our grain. Get rid of it.'" This is the kind of stuff that was going on. And every day, the efficient--. I'd be hearing these horror stories, ok? But I'd say, "Well, thanks guys, but it's not doing me any good. I'm done."

EE: No because--. And you'd lived for efficiency, so to speak, and this evidence of lack of it--.

RK: It just didn't end up the way it should have, you know? And because of that man. Because people were so fearful of their jobs because of the power of that individual. And then of course, I guess he took that power to the next level, which we don't even know about, but when you get rid of a CEO, he's doing something wrong, right?

EE: Where in the world were the directors in all of this? The board of directors?

RK: Well, I'm hearing he got rid of a lot of them. I'm hearing he just--. People were so fed up. They were taking early retirement. They just bailed out.

[1:20:03]

EE: How could this have happened to CP Rail?

RK: The ones--. Well, there was a lot--.

EE: The only railway company in North America that never went bankrupt is CP Rail. It's been a survivor with a vengeance, but--.

RK: There was a lot of rear end kissers. I was going to say something else, but we're on tape here. But the ones that remained were his group basically, ok?

EE: Yeah. Well, they would be.

RK: They could go to work with this--.

EE: I mean, he would drive all of the good people out of the organization.

RK: Yeah. Now, if somebody was willing to come to work who couldn't care less as long as they got their paycheque, he was surrounded by a lot of those people. But that's how it ended, you know? And then of course this new--. I'm not sure what's happening now. I hear a lot of stories, you know, that what they did. They just go to a department in Calgary, and they go to a young girl who, let's say, was in filing, and they'd say, "You want that job over there? That general yardmaster's job?" And it would pay probably three times, and they'd give it to her. And she'd take it, and she'd go there. And you can't blame her, right?

EE: Now did Green have some kind of affirmative action agenda? Because sending an organization of four women into any railway yard, not just Thunder Bay, would strike me as just the craziest thing the guys ever heard of. Because railwaying, railroading, has been a largely male business other than office staff.

RK: You know what? That's a good point. We went through some of that here. Now irrespective of what was going on with Fred Green, I hired females. And remember when we went through the affirmative action, the initial part of it, when they instructed us to hire--.

EE: Early '80s perhaps?

RK: We had to hire--. If I was going to hire ten people, I had to make sure three of them were Aboriginal, two of them--. Ok?

EE: Yeah. Employment equity.

RK: Yeah, so I did that.

EE: Early '80s, I would think.

RK: But I would get myself in a lot of trouble because by the time they'd come back after to measure the records, they'd say, "Well, where are these minorities?" I'd say, "Well, if you look, I hired them, but they quit." I'd say, "Most of them quit after the first, second paycheck." I said, "So, you know, don't blame me. I did all this stuff. I tried." They wanted me--. But I kept--. I went along with all of this. It wasn't one of these--. It was a man's world, but believe me, I saw the change a long time ago. You could see where they could fit in. There was a lot of girls, females, who could fit in with that aggressive environment.

EE: Sure, where there are some women that can without doubt.

RK: Right. Well, I had a few. I'll give you another good example. I had a few who come up to me and shut the door and say, "I've got a complaint." And I'd say, "Yeah?" They'd say, "I work midnights out in the yard there in the tower, and the men are swearing." I'd say, "Yeah." "Well, what are you going to do about it?" I'd say, "Well, are they swearing at you?" "No. They're just swearing." Yeah.

EE: It's the way they talk! [Laughs]

RK: I'd say, "Well, that's the environment." "Oh." Well, one of them took it to the union, and they took it to the arbitrator, and the arbitrator ruled in my favour. He said--. Basically, he said what I said. He says--. My men weren't, they weren't going up and swearing at these individuals.

EE: They weren't coming on to her.

RK: They were reading a book, or they were eating a sandwich and that, and they were--. And she was in the room listening to it, and she took offence to it. The arbitrator basically said, "If you choose to work in that environment, then that comes with the territory, ok?" So that stuff was going on. And I promoted some females to yardmasters. They didn't last because that environment, it was a lot of helter-skelter. It was a pretty tough situation. But the company, how it ended up? I'm not too sure these later years what's happening over there.

EE: Well, I'm just thinking of Green's decision to send--. Scientific management has a long history on this continent and beyond—and I won't go into it, it's not at the tip of my tongue anyway this afternoon—but what he was doing was not in the traditions of scientific management. You don't want to disrupt an organization as he was. In fact, it just boggles the mind. It's almost incredible, impossible to believe that any executive of a railway company would do this kind of stuff.

RK: Would do that, yeah. If you met him, you'd understand. He was a very different type of an individual. He was trying to market himself, ok? He just, "I'm general manager. I want to be vice-president." And then you know how we have VP of operations et cetera? And he marketed himself to the top. And whoever got lost in the smoke, he didn't care.

[1:25:24]

EE: Climbing the pyramid.

RK: But the company was making money despite the problems. You know, we did a lot of revenue streaming in the '80s that I was involved in. And we realized that a lot of our customers are because they've got no choice. You follow where I'm going with that?

EE: Mmhhh. Of course. Well, the grain companies. You had the lines and CN had the other lines.

RK: Well, what happened, some of the higher ups said, "Well, if they've got no choice, then we can do whatever the hell we want." Ok?

EE: Monopoly pricing.

RK: And once that started sneaking in and everything, I said, "Jeez. I don't think I want to be a part of that type of thinking." You know? It was nasty. Same thing happened with the quadrennial review. Did you speak with anyone involved with the--? You know how the railways used to submit--. The railway's claim to the government that they were losing money handling grain, you might have been involved back in the day.

EE: Mmhhh. For the Crow Rate, yeah.

RK: So they went to the government and said, "You have to subsidize us." Ok? So they come up with a grain subsidy act, and every four years the railways had to submit their costs, ok? Well, I was also involved with that, and they would submit--. Ok, you've got a piece of track here that you handle grain on, but you also handle every other commodity under the sun on that piece of track. Why should the taxpayers pay for that? So--.

EE: Because they told government that only grain was moving on that track?

RK: Well, yeah. The way they set it up, it was so complicated how could anybody ever figure it out? But the government would probably give them, I bet you, three quarters of a billion dollars subsidy to handle the grain in an efficient manner. You know, the government probably pushed back on--.

EE: Before Fred Green.

RK: Yeah. Now, I don't know. You may know, you two gentlemen, because you've been doing this for the last five years, whether that subsidy is still in place.

EE: No, I think it's completely gone.

RK: It depleted, eh? Maybe because--. Do you remember a couple years ago the government was going to fine the railways for not-. What would be the--? How would they have got away with--? Unless there was a subsidy, you know, like, I mean--.

EE: Well, the government can do, in a sense, what the government chooses to do.

RK: [Laughs] Yeah.

EE: In this case, having created the kind of system without organization—the Grain Commission is gone—the only power they can now exert on grain movement was to threaten to fine them if they didn't get the stuff to the Lakehead. I think there are lots of stories in that area still to be told. I won't go into--.

RK: Oh, no doubt. You know the--.

EE: There was a *Rolling Stone* article early this year about companies such as Goldman-Saks getting into commodity storage. Now, the article focuses on the movement of aluminum ingots, shuffling them back and forth so the warehouses were empty. Well, it was just because the ingots were on the move deliberately. And one of the companies that was mentioned in the article as doing this was Glencore. Glencore owns Viterro. And when this story ran last winter as the government was being confronted with lack of grain movement, I began to wonder whether another way of making money is not to move a commodity rather than shuffle it around. And so what power does the government have having left it to the market? And I wanted to wonder about that. Fred Green's activities were coming through in, what '96/'97?

RK: Yeah. Mmhmm.

EE: Now the Grain Transportation Agency [GTA] had been abolished, correct?

RK: Just. It--.

EE: Do you think there was any connection between the two? Or was the man not astute enough to realize?

RK: No, I think the GTA abolishment, I think it began when the shift went to the West Coast. They saw a decrease in demand here, you know? I mean, when the volume started going down in Thunder Bay, someone--.

EE: Does the name Doug Young ring any bells? MP Minister of Transport?

RK: No. I did meet with a couple of them. But I think--.

EE: Young was in the Chrétien cabinet, and when they were reducing spending in the mid-'90s—that draconian Martin budget of 1995—Doug Young was busy laying off thousands of workers in transport. And I think the GTA went because of that.

RK: Ok. Well then, in terms of timing, that's fine. It might have been--. Do you know Brownlow? He's gone now. Too bad you didn't get a chance to meet him. He was a GTA worker in Thunder Bay with Tony Kaplanis. But when they left, I have to admit, there was a less demand on the GTA in Thunder Bay because the volumes of grain coming through here were going down fast.

[1:30:18]

EE: Sure. Well, that had been happening, and that, of course, is what you were focussing on. The movement to the Pacific coast.

RK: Yeah. And then, of course, the railway now was thinking what to do. I hear rumours they went back to demurrage. I don't know. I can't believe why anyone would want to do that. So anyway, that's happened, and then the business dropped right off. Then, of course, now it's only in the last couple of years that we had a couple of good crops. So it's going to go up and down, I guess, forever.

Now Fred Green, no. I think it was in terms of timing because the CEO was getting up there in age in the '90s. Dodge, his name was Dodge. He left. They probably pushed him out or bought him out or however they do that up at that level. And there was a lot of movement up at that level, ok? Cross-referencing, VPs from the Atlantic region coming to the Pacific region. Because our company, you know how we had different areas? We had VP of Montreal and--.

EE: All that counts is principles of management. Damn the information that you're supposed to be managing. [Laughs]

RK: Yeah. But Fred Green created a--. It was a fear. It was a fear on the railway. Not the unions. The unions, they thought it was funny.

EE: They couldn't believe it.

RK: Matter of fact, they were making--.

EE: Well, when the guys are suddenly going to eight-hour shifts, or whatever they were, five days of the week--.

RK: And not only that, they even got the unions to start signing their own, like, for example, overtime. Usually overtime has to be authorized, ok?

EE: Yeah, I would think so.

RK: They took away the authorization. Most people are honest enough. If they're going to put in for a shift of overtime, we'll trust them. That's fine. But my name was on the bottom of that budget there at the end of the year et cetera, you know? So I mean, if there's going to be \$1 million of overtime, and someone comes to me, I'd have to say, "I have no idea. I never signed. I never authorized any of it."

EE: Company policy. I was being--.

RK: Little things like that, you know, happening to me.

EE: Did you have any kind of sense of how CP Rail was comparing with CNR [Canadian National Railway] during the '90s, during the last years of your employment?

RK: Yeah.

EE: Any kind of feel for the other company?

RK: Yeah. They were more efficient. You know what? But they're bigger. They're larger. They were more--. They were buying American railways. They had maybe eight—at that time—maybe eight, nine thousand more employees than we had. Who among us would even pay attention to the operating ratio in the '60s, '70s, and '80s? If somebody said to me, "What's the operating ratio?" I would have, "Who cares?" You know? In the '90s, anybody who was paying attention to what was going on maybe--. You know, there was the biggest efficient railway in the United States was the Burlington Northern, and everyone would say that their

operating ratio was like, let's say, 56 or something. So they don't have to spend 56 cents to make a buck. Well, our—when I left the railway—it was around 80. Now I think it's in the 60s.

EE: That's what Hunter Harrison's supposed to do. Reduce that ratio.

RK: You know, it's all bookkeeping too though, eh?

EE: Well, sure.

RK: You know what I'm saying?

EE: Well, ultimately, it's all numbers, but you hope they're well-based.

RK: Yeah. You know, like if somebody said to me, "You can twist your budget around to come up with anything you want if you--." But let's face it, the less money you can spend to make a buck, that's what it's all about, ok? Because CNR was always better. I don't know why. I know most of them maybe. They didn't look efficient to me, but--.

EE: CNR was a crown corporation until--.

RK: For many years.

EE: What, about '78 or so? The late '70s?

RK: Right.

EE: It was converted into the 80s, wasn't it?

RK: Yeah, there was a process there when it shifted over to private. Mmhmm.

EE: Of course, it had been the result of, well, there's that incredible history of the bankruptcies and whatnot back around 1920 and all of that. And to have this incredibly efficient railway come out of it at the end is a marvel on--.

RK: They still are. I would say that they're probably one of the top railways in North America, not just Canada. Probably Burlington Northern, I'm thinking, you know, right up there at the top.

EE: Yeah. But they laid off a hell of a lot of workers to get there.

RK: Yeah. And their--.

EE: I remember reading in the late '70s about the number of workers that CNR laid off, and I thought to myself, "The crown corporation's saving money. The UI fund is getting a massive hit." But, Owen, you wanted to--?

OM: Just on a--. I was on the periphery of management changes and decisions on what was an efficient service and what wasn't and, you know, management philosophies. So you went through, obviously, a very difficult time because of the way the system was done. You felt you were giving it your very best at that point, and then all of a sudden all of these powers beyond your control are pushing your buttons. So you left. How did that affect you afterwards?

[1:35:16]

RK: Well, I'm glad you asked that because it did have an effect.

EE: How did it?

RK: For one thing--.

OM: The reason I'm asking—and I don't want you to feel that I'm intruding—but it's just the people just see these as numbers and statistics. They don't see the human issue as part of it.

RK: Right. That's exactly it. That's the part that hurt. Now, I started getting that a lot after I left. Everyone said, "Well, you knew you were just a number." And I was getting this from people out west and such. I said, "Well, yeah. I realize that now."

EE: In the company?

RK: The people who were still there, eh?

EE: Yeah.

RK: But they were trying to rationalize that, no matter how loyal you are and how many years you put in et cetera, you really are— at that top level—you--.

EE: Just a cipher.

RK: Yeah, you know? It affected me in a couple ways. I told my wife. I said, “I wanted to hang around. I wanted to leave on my own terms.” And that’s important. So I says--. When I ended up retiring, which was a forced retirement because they just said you’re--. I says, “Now what?” I had not prepared hobbies. I said, “What do you do?” You go from a ten-hour day, five, six--. And I was the kind of guy, I had a computer, and I did work here on the weekends at home too. You got from that--.

EE: To nothing.

RK: Yeah. So how do you fill all that stuff, ok? So it was a struggle. My wife helped me through that. Good thing, you know?

EE: Well, you survived it in the first order because it would kill people.

RK: Yeah. It was--. I felt that I still was energetic enough and I still had a lot to offer, you know? So it took a while. I had a bad taste in my mouth the way it all happened. And then, you know, you get over it.

EE: You were 57, 58?

RK: Yeah.

EE: Yeah, and if--.

RK 55. Too young. I was too young.

EE: Yes, of course, '43 to '98. Yes, of course.

RK: But again, in my mind--.

EE: Freedom 55, not that way.

RK: I'm thinking, "Jeez, if I can work until I'm 60, if I can work another five years, see what happens." I says, "I mean, the railway is changing et cetera." But it was just not good. But the company never really--. We had a human resource department. Not once did they pick up the phone and phone. Nothing. It's just like you never existed. Yet when you stop and think how many people, how many bosses—remember I told you they changed the boss every two years—well when you're there 35 years, that's 15, 16 bosses you had to work with who all--.

EE: Quite a gallery of executives.

RK: Yeah. And almost every one of them were promoted because of their success here. And they used to say to me, they'd say the--. Thunder Bay had a good reputation.

EE: I can well imagine it would.

RK: As you well know. Both railways. By pushing through those record numbers, back then too with me it was all--. Somebody would say, "Can you unload 1,000 cars in a day?" "I think we can." And I loved hiring people. I mean, that was the whole idea. I thought that was a good thing, you know? I used to hire people and say, "You may not work a full year this year or--." But I said, "But you're going to--."

EE: Build up the seniority.

RK: I said, "But as you go along, you'll get in there, unless you find something better." And they were ok with that. I hired students. We used to hire university kids knowing that they were going to go back to school. I hired my son, and he was going to university. And I said, "This is not going to be your career, but you can work here during the summer, make some money." He was on a student list. So in other words, he wasn't going to scoop anybody there. I said, "You go back to school. Next summer if we're busy, we'll bring you back again as an experienced--." Because we trained all these kids, and I never wanted them to lose that experience.

Would you believe in my 37 years there, I fired one person? Like, a lot of people wouldn't realize that a general yardmaster, "You must have fired 100." No. I used to say, "Stop and think about it. When you hire a switchman, you train him for like six weeks—rules and regulations and safety, and you give him--. And the radio and all that." I said, "You spend a lot of time showing him what--."

EE: You invested in him.

RK: I said, “Why in heaven’s name would I want to get rid of that person?” Unless he shot someone, you know what I’m saying? So we had a discipline system at the railway. If you broke a rule, you didn’t get fired. It was a demerit system. It started off, and it was just five—a low number of—demerits. If you accumulated 60, then the company *may* terminate you. There’s no will. And even then, if a guy had 55 and he made a mistake, I’d fudge the books. I’m not going to fire anybody, you know?

[1:40:19]

EE: If these were sort of honest mistakes, the person wasn’t--.

RK: Exactly. Now these people have got years of seniority, they’ve got a wife, and they’ve got kids. Who--. That wasn’t me.

EE: So this was cumulative? It wasn’t something every year it cleared off or anything.

RK: Exactly. And everybody could make mistakes. So I never fired anybody—one person—and that was because he was a new employee, and we couldn’t find him one night. So they phoned me at home and they said, “We don’t even know where the heck he is. He’s got a radio, and we hear--. He won’t answer it, but we hear.” I found him in the Adanac Hotel sitting with three young ladies, and he was sipping. And the radio was right on the--. And they had a pitcher of beer there. When I went in, I says--. I took the radio and I says, “You’re going to have to come in and sign your resignation.” “Ok, ok,” he says. And I says, “Come in tomorrow.” He says, “Well, can I stay here tonight?” I says, “Well, you can do what you want.” I says, “You’re done.” And I took the radio, I went back in my car, and I got on my radio, and I said, “I got the radio.” And I says, “He’ll be--.” I didn’t have the paper that he had to sign with me, but I said, “We’ll do that tomorrow.” And he was the only one. And he didn’t really care.

EE: No, obviously not! [Laughs] Enjoying the company of the girls and the beer, eh?

RK: Yeah. He just--. Switching wasn’t for him, you know? He got his first paycheque and, “I’m going to spend it at the Adanac Hotel.” But--. And you know, I guess that’s how, when you get your career there, you want to have a little banquet. I mean, I was used to--.

EE: Yeah, of course you would.

RK: I was used to--. What I did, part of my—as a general yardmaster—as my people would retire, I would arrange a retirement party. Couple hundred, you know? You do the ticket thing. You bring them up there. You give them golf clubs, and you kind of roast them a little bit, and you drink, and you have your party at the Valhalla. I must've done that 15 times, you know. So.

EE: So your yardmaster friends across the territory just didn't dare do anything of that sort for you when you retired I guess?

RK: No, no. There was a--.

EE: Because they would be your equals.

RK: There were a lot of people who--.

EE: Or the supervisor, superintendent could have, I guess.

RK: Yeah. You know, when you think back about--. I used to think to myself, these people, a lot of them were younger than me too— Most of my bosses were younger than me because they were up and coming, so they would hire on the railway, and the company would move them around here and there, and they'd sit them in Thunder Bay to learn. So then they weren't going to go out on a limb for me. And even though they were appreciative of what I was doing--. And if I heard it once, I must have heard it a hundred times, they used to say, "I don't know what you're doing, but just keep on doing it." [Laughing]

EE: It's working!

RK: Yeah. Because at the end of the day, somebody would say, "Do you know how many cars of grain you unloaded in one day? A thousand cars?" We were records, records, records. His phone call--. His phone would ring from probably somebody in Vancouver saying, "Holy." And he'd feel good about it, right?

EE: Yeah, of course he would.

RK: And he'd come in there, but he didn't know. And I didn't bother to tell him what I did. I didn't have time to tell him.

EE: Yeah. Well, he's got to keep his eyes open, walk around, and see what you were doing. Visit the yards a few times.

RK: And then when they start--. I'll give you an example too. When the company decided to reorganize, some of the methods they used, you know, you rank all your employees and you had to rank them against another department. Is your secretary any more important than your secretary? So if you wanted to protect your staff, you had to go to the meeting, and you had to support your--. It was like a battle, ok? Not a physical battle, but--.

EE: Yeah, brag about your people.

RK: So you had to go in with your documents, and I did. I go in with my secretary, the documents to protect her, and I said--. The boss, they had the one rule. They used to say, "The way you've got to look at this, Bob, is that if the employee doesn't come to work tomorrow, will the terminal still function efficiently? Use that as a key." So I go to the boss next thing, "You know something? Then you should get rid of me because my secretary, if she doesn't come in tomorrow, who does all that?" I said, "I can't lay off 35 people. I don't even know anything about unemployment records or health records and everything. I can't do that. She does that." And I says, "When I hire them, she brings them in. I send them to Dr. Dodick for the medical. She handles all that stuff. I don't. If I don't come in tomorrow, my subordinates, they'll keep it going." You know? "No, no, no. No, no."

[1:45:02]

EE: Misunderstanding it.

RK: So this is the kind of stuff I'd go through. But at the end of the day, my secretary made it through the first cut, and the engineering secretary probably wouldn't. Now, of course, they're angry because their--. But his secretary, all she did was make coffee, let's say, ok? Ok. So if he can't go to the meeting and support her job by justifying what she does, don't blame me, you know?

EE: No, no.

RK: So my secretary did survive many, many of the cuts. Then eventually what they did is they—with the staff that survived—they amalgamated. They closed outlying offices. They closed my office in Westfort. They put all the people in the one building. It was saving costs, saving costs. "Shut off your computer. Shut off the lights." It was getting stupid, really, at that point, but nevertheless we did it. "Change the lightbulbs. Put in the energy saving lightbulbs." My God, some of the stuff that we were doing just to save nickels on the budget, you know?

EE: Yeah. And then Fred Green comes along and [laughing] decides to blow the budget! Brother.

RK: Yeah. The thing is though—remember I mentioned before—the railway, because your customers were captive, they had no choice but to ship with you. You could run as inefficient as you wanted, but you still earned that money. You still made money at the end of the day. You were profitable because these people, even though their product was delayed, even though these trains were not on time, even though the train from Vancouver was supposed to be in Montreal on Wednesday and didn't get there until Thursday, you still made your money. Because a lot of these people couldn't ship it the way the shipping lines were, especially out west.

EE: A lot of the grain, or some amount of the grain, began to be moved by trucks over the years on the Prairies.

RK: Some did.

EE: And I wondered whether railway shenanigans had anything to do with that.

RK: Well, you know, there was a fear that it was going to come here, but when you looked at it logistically--.

EE: It's a long run.

RK: It was--. I said, "Do you realize how many trucks would have to come here just for one hopper car of grain?" A hopper car of grain handles 100 tonnes, 100 metric tonnes of grain. A truck handles like ten, eh?

EE: Yes.

RK: I says, "Then you've got the road restrictions and everything." I said--. But to answer your question, there was a lot of cross-border American type--.

EE: Yes, I guess that's what was going on.

RK: Yeah. There was a lot of that went on. The American grain system is different than ours. It's like a shotgun approach. You talk to a grain elevator guy in Duluth, he wouldn't know from one day to the next what type of business he's going to have. He'd just wake up in the morning and whatever.

EE: Just react to it as it happens, eh?

RK: Yeah. We didn't operate that way.

EE: No, no. Clearly not.

RK: We had--. Remember I was telling you about our weekly meetings? We knew a week in advance how many cars are coming in, how many ships were coming into the port, how much grain the ships were--. So the other grain elevators could measure their room, you know?

EE: Was the Wheat Board central to that?

RK: It played an integral part. It definitely was because their bookkeeping and their statistics, they were accurate. So when they give the GTA the stats, it was good stuff, you know? You could use this.

EE: Because you were working with numbers that they generated, eh?

RK: Yeah.

EE: Rather than, say, Sask Pool, it was the Canadian Wheat Board that was telling you what was moving.

RK: Right.

EE: So with the Wheat Board, with the industry then having been fundamentally changed in the last two or three years by the Harper Government too, one wonders. It must be some interesting stories of people who are not yet retired, darn it! [Laughing]

RK: And then, you know, as they loosened the rules from cross-border shipping, I understand a lot of that went on. Ok, yeah.

EE: Seven or eight minutes? You were saying about cross-border shipping?

RK: Yeah. I understand that there was a lot of--. Ok, now the Americans, most of their crop was let's say used for domestic consumption, and so as they shipped, as they moved more to export, they would end up needing, buying, feed from Thunder Bay. Ah, Thunder Bay--. From Canada.

EE: From the Prairies.

RK: A lot of that stuff would probably be trucked. Let's say the farmers, they were in the game. They were in this business to move the grain as quick as they can, right, because that's how they make their money. I didn't really get involved in the politics of it, but I understand there was a lot of conflict when the farmers started shipping grain themselves, independent of the--.

[1:50:11]

EE: I think a lot of it is feed grains. I've got a brother-in-law in Gretna as it happens now, who's been working moving grain, and I think a lot of it has been feed grain across the border and through various points in central Mantioba.

RK: Right.

EE: Well, we're in danger of--. We've had one heck of a time here already.

RK: Time flies doesn't it when you start talking about the history! [Laughing]

EE: What did you work for during--. Who did you work for during this time? What kind of work did you do? Please describe a typical day. [Laughing] What would you like people to know about the work you did? What might interest or surprise people most about the work you did? What are you most proud of? [Laughs] I think--. Now, the major changes. Are there any--. I think you've answered many of these questions well enough.

RK: Probably have covered every one of those. Yeah.

EE: In terms of major changes, are there any other changes that you'd like to--. That come to mind in terms of--?

RK: Some of the big changes in the grain industry?

EE: Yeah. Or if you just want to survey them for that matter.

RK: You know, did you get involved much with the provincial grain hopper? You know how Manitoba and--.

EE: Sure. Bought hopper cars.

RK: Yeah, right.

EE: Alberta and so on and so forth.

RK: You know, there was--. To me, I don't think that was ever explained properly to the people. Like those hopper cars were paid for by the taxpayers of that province, right? And they probably should be utilized for the taxpayers of that province to move their grain, you know?

EE: Sure, sure.

RK: But I know a lot of those hoppers were used because when I travelled--. My wife and I started going to Florida about 30 years ago.

EE: Driving?

RK: I was still working, and my wife said to me—and we can end it on this point—she says, “Bob,” she says, “When are we going to start going away on vacation?” And I says, “Jeez, I never really thought about that.” Remember I--. I just wanted to work. And she said, “Well, are you just going to work until you retire?” And she says, “And then you're going to probably drop dead the day after.” So I said, “Well, what do you want to do?” She says, “Well, let's go away in the wintertime when it's slack.” because I had six weeks vacation, you know? So we started going away.

EE: Accumulated, I suppose.

RK: No, I was there 35 years--.

EE: You weren't allowed to accumulate, I suppose. [Laughs]

RK: Yeah. And I has six weeks, but I couldn't take it in the summertime because you're too busy.

EE: No, of course not.

RK: So we started going away for two weeks, and I liked it. I liked it. So then I said, “Next year we’ll do it again.” Do it again, do it again, do it again. So when--.

EE: So you were driving to Florida, I presume, each time, and back?

RK: Right. So when I retired, even though I retired with a negative taste in my mouth, I says, “Well, it’s good. We’re going to Florida. We’re going for three months.” And as I’m driving there, every time I see a train, I’m looking at it.

EE: Of course, of course.

RK: And she could tell. She says, “Can’t you forget that?” I says, “Ah, ok.” But I start recognizing these provincial cars. And I’m thinking, “What the heck are these? They’re not supposed to be sending--. What are these provincial cars doing in Tennessee, and what are these--? Them buggers,” I says, “they’re actually shipping grain to them. And they shouldn’t be doing stuff like that.” Because the Americans weren’t in any hurry to send that empty back. The car would probably sit there half the winter, you know? And of course, I’m thinking car turnaround, you know? [Laughing] But I’m retired. I mean, my wife would have to remind me, “Don’t worry about it anymore.” But still do, you know. It’s still there. You drive back and you see all these cars sitting on the siding. And there’s a lot of them.

EE: Yeah.

RK: I don’t know what--. This past year it got pretty busy, so I guess you’re not going to see that.

EE: Yeah. Well, so the introduction of the cars into the system was obviously very important.

RK: It really was, yeah.

EE: And then the things, how it was used. Any comments on challenges that you’d like to add? Three minutes.

RK: Challenges, yeah. Hm.

EE: Aside from stupid superiors! [Laughs]

RK: Aside from that general manager who became the CEO? Yeah. [Laughing] No, you know, actually I was an individual who really, I liked challenges. Like I just loved it if the GTA would phone me and say, “Do you think you can unload 5,000 cars next week?” Heck of a challenge.

EE: A thousand a day or whatever?

RK: I’d say, “Man, yeah, Let’s go for it.”

EE: Bring it on!

RK: You know? If I had to put the word out to the unemployment office, “I need ten guys or I need 15 guys.” Or if I had to phone Montreal and say, “You’ve got to send me a bunch or more locomotives down here.” Because at one time, at one time, we had 40 local yard assignments. Like that’s 40—that’s not trains—that’s 40 yard assignments running around the city, moving grain et cetera. To me that was a challenge, but it was a feel-good challenge, you know?

[1:55:09]

EE: Sure. Makes a life worth living to have that kind of thing to take on.

RK: Exactly.

EE: Well, I think we probably should wrap it up. This has been quite terrific.

RK: I enjoyed it!

EE: And I hope that it’s been some sort of--.

RK: Well, it’s brought back a lot of--. I’ll be thinking about this when I go to bed tonight, [Laughing]

EE: There’s language people use in terms of fulfillment. What did they say when they want--. Closure! Has this been closure on what that S.O.B. did to you?

RK: Yeah, closure. Exactly. Actually, I did have closure several years back. So this brought it--. This opened up my memory again, but then I'll have closure again tonight probably.

EE: Sure.

RK: Because like I say, I was dedicated my entire life, and then when you retire with a bad taste in you mouth, you get to a point where I won't--. I don't pay attention to it much anymore.

EE: And this is a permanent record of your contribution to the movement of grain through the Lakehead. And I'm so very glad we got it.

RK: Good. Thanks very much.

EE: Thanks very much.

RK: Thanks very much for talking to me.

End of Interview.