

Narrator: William Kozak (WK)

Company Affiliations: Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), Canadian National Railway (CNR)

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Summary: Carman for the Canadian Pacific Railway William Kozak discusses his career on the railway and the connection his work had to the Thunder Bay grain industry. He describes his first job in the Canadian National Railway roundhouse as a railcar inspection helper, his first job with the CPR as a general labourer and hostler helper, and then his apprenticeship to become a carman. He explains the work of a carman in inspecting the railway’s rollingstock, and he details the common issues with grain boxcars and hopper cars. Kozak also discusses his involvement in “roadwork” dealing with derailments and wrecks on the CPR’s main lines. He shares stories of some memorable wrecks, railway related fatalities, and visits to the elevators to deal with derailments and issues in the car sheds. Other topics discussed include the layout of the Westfort railyards, the operation of the hump yard, the introduction of machines to help with manual labour, the importance of safety on the job, working in cold weather, and the CPR’s downsizing.

Keywords: Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR); Railway carman; Grain transportation—rail; Rail locomotives; Boxcars; Hopper cars; Railcar inspection; Railcar repair; Railcar servicing; Derailments; Railway accidents; Workplace accidents; Workplace fatalities; Westfort; Intercity; Current River; Hump yard; Mechanization; Health and safety; Canadian National Railway (CNR); CNR roundhouse; Grain doors

Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: This interview is taking place on August 24 th on Little Pigeon Bay, and the year is 2015. I will let the interviewee for today introduce himself and his connection to the grain trade.
WK: Hello, I’m William Kozak, and I worked for the CP Rail [Canadian Pacific Railway] from 1969 to 2002, for 33 and a third years.

NP: And when we talked before this taped part of the interview, you had mentioned something about the roundhouse, where you worked for CN [Canadian National Railway] as a student before you started with CP. So tell me a little bit about the work in the roundhouse.

WK: Yeah. I was hired as a labourer, and I worked where the units were. They used to do inspections with the machinist and electrician, and you had to clean underneath the units. They used to bring the units in, and you used to have to steam them underneath to get all the grease and all the oil off them so they could check all their parts under there. It was quite an intense job.

NP: What's a unit?

WK: A unit is a locomotive. That's what they call them.

NP: So they wouldn't bring boxcars or anything like that in? This is just--.

WK: Not in that--. This is just the units. Yeah. That was on CN.

NP: And there isn't a roundhouse anymore.

WK: No. They took the roundhouse down. There was a roundhouse in the East End too before. That's where the Y is. In the middle of the Y, they said that's where the roundhouse used to be there.

NP: And what do you mean when you say, "the Y"?

WK: Well, the Y is where they turned the units around. So if they want to send them back west--. Say they come from the west, and they want to send the units back, they've got to go around the Y. They go like this and this and then they turn around so they're facing the right way.

NP: And the roundhouse used to sort of just turn them in a circle?

WK: Well, they would come in, and they had a turntable. They turned like this. CN still had that. They turned, and then you could move. You didn't have to go around a Y. You just put it on the turntable and turned it. There was a big motor on it. You just turned it, it went right around, and then you stopped it.

NP: Was that the first time, when you were a high school student, that was your first introduction to trains?

WK: Yes, that was the first for the CN. Yes.

NP: Did anything impress you about trains when you first got that up close and familiar with them?

WK: I guess I was impressed. I don't know. It was pretty powerful units. Yeah, it was pretty impressive, I guess.

NP: Did you work there just the one summer?

WK: Yeah, just the one summer.

NP: Then in 1969 you decided to work for CP. Was that just a summer job as well?

WK: That was. It did start off as a summer job.

NP: And you liked it well enough to stay on?

WK: Yes. [Laughing] Yes, I did.

NP: So let's talk about the early time in your career then with CP. What kind of position did you start out with there?

WK: I started off as a labourer, then I worked up to a hostler helper, then I ended up coming up as a trainee, a carman trainee.

NP: So what kind of work does a labourer do?

WK: He does just cleaning and picking up, sweeping the floors. All that kind of stuff. Servicing units. Lot of times they used to have to, when there were run-through units, they used to have to go to the depot and clean the cab out and service them, put water and all that, clean the windows, and all that kind of stuff.

NP: So more inside work on the trains?

WK: Yes. Just a little bit on run-through trains.

NP: Run-through trains being--?

WK: Well, trains would go to the stop at the depot, and they would have the units there fuelling them. You would fuel them there and check the water. They would put water in them, and they'd go right through. They wouldn't come to the shop. They wouldn't stop in.

NP: So were you after the coal days then? Were any of the trains still coal-fired when you started working?

WK: No, no. No, they were all diesel.

NP: So you're a youngster compared to some of the other guys that we've interviewed. [Laughs]

WK: Yes. But when I worked, they had some of the vans or cabooses. They still had coal, but they were for a yard. They had like the potbelly stoves in them. They had them for yard work, just those ones.

NP: So what do you mean yard work? So--.

WK: In the yard. They just used them in the yard. They didn't use them on the mainline because they had the newer vans that had motors, electricity.

[0:05:03]

NP: So labourers and track people would go into the cabooses for their breaks?

WK: No, just when they ran grain from Westfort to Current River, they had to have a van on the back so the guy wouldn't freeze to death. So they had these old vans that they'd put on.

NP: So you started as a carman or hostler, is that what you called it?

WK: Labourer and then hostler helper, which is just helping the hostler turn the units around, getting them serviced.

NP: And what's a hostler? That's a name I'm not familiar with.

WK: Say they needed three units to go west on a train. They're going to make up a grain train, so they need three units. So he'll go get the units and put them in the right order. They have to be facing the right way, and you might have to go on the Y, and then you have to hook them all up, and then they do air tests and everything to get them all ready.

NP: So he would coordinate the engineers that would do that or does the hostler move the trains physically?

WK: No, the hostler moves the trains. Actually, a lot of them were older engineers when I first started. They'd be--. Yeah. When I first started.

NP: A carman, what does a carman do?

WK: He repairs boxcars, puts them back on the track or takes them off, and services--. He works on grain trains to get them ready to go, and all kinds of trains. Inspects them in and out.

NP: And that was a four-year training position, I think you said?

WK: Yeah.

NP: Before you moved up to full-fledged.

WK: Yeah.

NP: What--.

WK: There always was an apprenticeship. There's an apprenticeship for carman that you could take. I think it was a five-year course. I'm not sure.

NP: Ah. In conjunction with the college, or just through the company?

WK: Yeah, through the company I think it was.

NP: What goes wrong with boxcars? What kinds of things need to be fixed?

WK: The wheels. The air brakes might go bad. Stuff breaks because of the material. The wheels shatter. Or not shatter, I should say, just go, wear out because they wear on the track. There's lots. Drawbars pull out. Everything lets go. Doors fall off. Sometimes you move them with the doors open, and when they hit hard, draft gears break, everything. Pockets break, everything inside.

NP: Do they still have that kind of repair? Or you said you retired in 2002. They still have that kind of repair done here? I know boxcars are a thing of the past, but--.

WK: I think, yeah, at the shop they do. The East End shop, car shop. Yeah. They do quite a bit of repairs. I don't know about now. It's been 13 years since I've been there. I should go back and look. [Laughs]

NP: Yeah. They're not going to do anything--. I mean, they're not going to go anywhere until they're repaired, at least the ones where the wheel's a problem or brakes.

WK: Well, yeah, the wheels they change in the shop, and then do a lot of repairs. A lot of brakes. The brake beams might--. The older cars, like old boxcars, the brakes used to be on like a hanger, and they used to snap sometimes or wear out and fall off. So you'd have them dragging. You had a lot of--. But then when the roller-bearing wheel came in, that really improved.

NP: So I would think that would create sparks, the other--?

WK: Oh, yeah. You'd get a lot of sparks. Sometimes you'd get a car moved, and the brakes would seize on it, and you'd get four flat wheels as it's sliding along. It would be flat that far down and skid.

NP: Because those were pretty, if they were loaded--.

WK: Oh, yeah. If they were loaded, grain cars are 100 tonnes. 100 tonnes, that's a lot of weight.

NP: You would have been there doing those kinds of repairs, I guess, as they were starting to move the fleet or the rolling stock—is that what they call it—the rolling stock from boxcars to hopper cars.

WK: Yes.

NP: What kind of difference did that make in your job? Were hopper cars less likely to need repair?

WK: Oh, yes. Especially when they were brand new, they were really good. They had a light brake shoe on them. They had a cobalt shoe, and the other ones had a big heavy steel shoe. So the weight changing was a lot easier. The doors were all underneath, these rolling--. And especially, on the boxcar you had to pop the journal box and make sure the brass and wedge was still in and oil them. You had to oil them. There was a lot more work with a boxcar because they were older too. They were 40 years old.

[0:10:34]

NP: At least.

WK: Yeah.

NP: Yeah.

WK: Then when they went to the--. Yeah. When they went to the grain door to keep the grain in, they had went to, like, a cardboard door instead of the--. They used to have wood there, and that made a big difference. They used to [inaudible] the doors out of them, so they used to crack a little. It was a little harder on them,

NP: I've heard a lot about the grain door division. Do you know anything about that group, the grain door division?

WK: Well, yeah. When they came out of the elevator, they would have to clean the old one out. They'd have to take it off and out of the empty as it came out of the elevator. That's what they did.

NP: And then what would happen to them? What happened to the doors?

WK: Yeah, the one door. They would usually open one door, so they would put that in the garbage, I guess. It had straps and cardboard on it.

NP: Did they ship old--.

WK: They would make sure it was cleaned.

NP: So the wooden pieces, did they just toss them away?

WK: No, not the wooden grain doors at the time. But that was when they went to paper. They went to cardboard with strapping in it, and they would nail them up.

NP: What happened to the wooden grain doors? Did they--.

WK: I don't know what happened.

NP: Did they go back west?

WK: I guess so. I guess that's what they did. I don't know how they did it. I don't know if they just left them in the boxcar or--. I wasn't around then for the wooden grain door.

NP: Hm!

WK: That's what they told me. When I came to work, they were already on the cardboard ones. But it was quite a job because they would have to clean all of them out as they came out of the elevator. They would have to get rid of all those grain doors on the one side. Usually, they only opened one door.

NP: Yeah. And I also understood that a lot of those grain doors went for construction projects around Thunder Bay.

WK: Oh, maybe. Maybe that's what they did with them.

NP: Yeah. I think Ron's grandparents' chicken coop was--.

WK: Built a shed? [Laughing] Oh, okay! Yeah, they probably did.

NP: It was good wood from what I understand from other people.

WK: Oh, yeah.

NP: How much of the trains or cars that you worked on were related to the grain trade during your career?

WK: Yeah, when I first started—that's when I was a carman trainee—I worked in Westfort, which was all empties. The loads coming into Westfort, we used to inspect them, and then the empties, we would have to service them, like couple the hoses and close the doors, oil them up, change brake shoes, fix springs, fix doors, and then get the train ready to go. Give it an air test to make sure it was okay, and then they would switch out the bad orders.

NP: So every piece of rolling stock had to go through that kind of inspection before they--?

WK: Yeah. Through Westfort, yeah.

NP: That must have been really intensive.

WK: Yeah. There was a lot of--. There was three shifts around the clock, yeah.

NP: What were those shifts?

WK: Day shift, 4:00 to 12:00, and midnight shift.

NP: Did you have a favourite?

WK: Oh, yeah. My favourite was day shift because it was easier to work. You didn't have to carry a light as you were inspecting. It was easier to work during the day. Even though I had Monday, Tuesday off, it was nicer in the day shift.

NP: How many people would be on that shift in Westfort?

WK: I think when we first started because we had the roller bearing—the plain bearing, I mean, the old boxcars—we had about eight carmen and six helpers that were oilers that would oil. They did a lot of oiling the boxes for us. Then when the roller bearings started to come in, they got rid of the helpers. They didn't need them. They just used the carmen after that because we hardly had any cars to oil after that. We just had a few, maybe 40 at a time. We had more roller-bearing stock.

[0:15:11]

NP: So put yourself back in that yard in Westfort. Would they pull in a train full of cars or would they come in one at a time?

WK: Well, usually when the train would stop, it would have been as many cars as they had to put in that track. Say the upper track was at the back, it was into--. Yeah, they would put them all along the back there. The loads would come in along the back. We had tracks near the main lines. We had three tracks. One we ran up and down with carts, and we had two tracks for empties.

NP: So I'm standing on the Brown Street walkover bridge, okay? So am I overlooking your yard then?

WK: Yeah.

NP: And if I'm facing towards the lake, where are the tracks you're talking about that would be sort of the working tracks? To the left or the right if I'm looking over the river off that bridge?

WK: They would be to the right if you're looking at the river, yeah.

NP: Oh, okay.

WK: Away from the main street. There was quite a few tracks in there. I forget how many. And then the older elevators were on the other side.

NP: Mmhmm. I'll come back to the elevators in a minute, but I'm just--. Imagine you're going out, then, to start your shift, and you have a car in front of you. Take me through how you did that job. You must have had some kind of systematic approach to doing your maintenance on it.

WK: When they brought the empties in, you mean?

NP: Mmhmm.

WK: Well, they'd bring the empties in along the two tracks where we had the tower was right there, and they used to bring them in, and then they would cut them. They used to make a cut right where we worked so we had space to walk in between. You had both ends, eh? You'd have the west end and the east end, I guess, you would say of the train. They were usually 150 cars long. But when the hopper came in, it made it a little smaller, maybe 113, because they were longer cars.

NP: So did you have to climb all over the cars or just work underneath?

WK: No, no. On either side, we inspected. We'd have guys inspecting on either side, and you would just go down. A lot of times, you would start where the joint was, and you'd go all the way up and come all the way back, and the guy would go to the east end and go all the way back. Coupling hoses and inspecting and writing down what you needed. If you needed a brake shoe or whatever, you wrote it and chalked it on the side of the car. So then you came back and did your repairs with a cart. We had little carts, and we did all the repairs.

NP: And how many would you cover in a shift?

WK: In a shift, a lot of times we did two trains, two trains or two and a half trains. Sometimes we'd maybe get the inspection done on the third train because we'd have to wait for one to pull out before we could start on it. They have to switch it out and all that. Yeah.

NP: And all of this was done outside whether it was summer baking heat or--.

WK: Yeah. Raining or--.

NP: Winter?

WK: Yeah. Yeah, it was cold. But grain used to slow down in the winter, so it wasn't too much.

NP: Ah. So were there layoffs like in the grain industry in the wintertime?

WK: Depends. Because they would fill the trains up, but it wouldn't be as many grain trains. Not like the summertime when they were really moving the trains. They moved a lot. In fact, one year they had set us up in behind where the plazas are. It was called New Yard. It was just behind where--.

NP: Intercity Plaza?

WK: Intercity Plaza. In back there they used to have two tracks there one year, that's how much grain we were moving. They sent the guys up there doing trains. They would do trains up there, and then we had Westfort as well. So that was really busy then. That's when we were all young though. [Laughing]

NP: So in a sense, it sort of worked because as you got older, there were fewer and fewer cars. [Laughs]

WK: Yes. Well, yeah. They're still moving lots of grain trains.

NP: But not as much. Not as much because a lot of it is going west now.

WK: Well, in the winter, they used to send the odd cars in the winter east. They used to load maybe 40 cars and send them east full of grain and ship them down. They used to do that quite a few times.

[0:20:15]

NP: Did your job involve you with the elevators at all?

WK: Oh, yeah. A lot of times I'd have to go in. They'd have a car over the end of the elevator. Like they would fill the elevators with cars. The man would start counting, and I guess he would forget, and he'd end up with a car right over into the lake. So you'd just--.

NP: And then what happens?

WK: Well, I used to go in there and if it was loaded, I'd have to go in, and we had a vacuvator. It sucked the grain out of the hoppers. So we would stick the pipe in there, and it's a giant vacuum. It'd suck the grain out.

NP: Would it be submersed in the water, or just sort of clinging to the edge?

WK: Well, some of them we had--. One winter we had one time—I remember it was in January—they couldn't find the car, and they found two that were in the water. They had a scuba diver who went down. It was dark. There was a hole chopped, and we turned the crane. We had a big hook there, and he dropped the hook down in the water. He was down there for a while. It seemed like ages, and then he came up, and he went. So he started going up, and all of a sudden, he came up, the ice started moving. All of a sudden, a boxcar came up out of the ice. It was cold. It was January, I think it was. I think we were there about 20 hours or something. It was cold.

NP: Who was responsible for that, do you think? I'm sure there was a big argument about who was responsible for it.

WK: I don't know. I don't want to get--. [Laughs]

NP: I don't mean names, but--.

WK: Somebody must have miscounted. [Laughs]

NP: And who's responsible for counting, the railway or the elevator?

WK: I guess the guy who was filling the track up.

NP: So a railway guy?

WK: I don't know how that one came off the side because it was over to the side. I don't know that one went in. I could see the one on the end because the track out end, and they just bowled it over.

NP: No, I've had other people talk about that and saying somebody lost track. And I said, "Well, who lost track? Who's responsible, the railway guy or the elevator guy?"

WK: Whoever is responsible for filling the track, I guess.

NP: And what happened to the grain, do you know?

WK: I think the grain just went in because it was under--. [Telephone rings]

NP: So then they'd lift the car out?

WK: Yeah. We pulled the car up and got it on the track and got it in. Yeah. I've had it where they had them right in derailed inside. I guess somehow they came off the track and we had to get them back, replace them, and get them back on the track, try to get them back on.

NP: How do you get them back on? Because I'm just looking at that, it's a pretty confined space in the car sheds.

WK: Oh, yeah. In the car shed, well, usually we try to drag it out and put replacers in between it, and it would jump back on the track. They would just roll up on these sort of wedges, and it would kick it over.

NP: What were those things called?

WK: Replacers.

NP: Replacers?

WK: Yeah.

NP: Just like replacing it back on the track?

WK: Yeah. That's what we called them.

NP: Yeah. Did that happen very frequently? Like say in a year, how--?

WK: Well, I guess there was a few. Sometimes they would just jump the track because they'd hit them so hard they'd bounce, eh? Like if they came down on a--. Say they through a couple of loads in where the wrong--. Maybe they were unloading wheat, and they had a couple of different kinds of cars, so they would throw them out, and if they hit it empty, then they'd hit the track and jump it. Not too bad, I guess. That time you'd get a knuckle out or something. A knuckle would fall out and they couldn't couple the car together, so you'd have to go out and put a knuckle in or something. There's a lot of different things. Or hoses.

NP: Were there some elevators that were better to work at than others in doing that kind of repair?

WK: Well, we never worked at the elevator. I know in Current River, they used to inspect the cars, in Current River, as they were coming out—or couple the hoses. They had to couple the hoses. They'd bring them across because they have to move from Current River to Westfort. You have to come across the CN tracks, so they have to have the air hooked up. So they had to couple the hoses and have air brakes on them before they could cross the tracks.

NP: Speaking of CN and CP, was there any rivalry, friendly rivalry, between the two companies? Like you had worked at both so--.

[0:25:05]

WK: Well, I just worked the summer there. No, I don't think there was. Yeah, they had a smaller shop. They laid off all their carmen. I think they only had 60 carmen or something. They laid most of them off, and they only had about ten left. Then they went down to two or something like that. They didn't have much. I'm sort of glad I worked for CP then.

NP: Yeah. Why did that happen, do you know? Like why fewer CN than CP people?

WK: I don't know why, because they still serviced the elevators. So I don't know why. But they didn't need them. Because they had a shop here too—a car shop, too, as well, so I don't know why they did that.

NP: What did you like best about the carman's work?

WK: Oh. Hm. Jeez. I guess at the end when I--. If we had cars off, getting them back on. It was nice when we got them on. It's a lot of work to get them back on the tracks sometimes. So that was probably one of the best.

NP: What did you like least about the carman's job?

WK: Cold weather, I guess. [Laughing] It was pretty cold.

NP: I'm not surprised to hear you say that.

WK: We used to have to wear thick wool. Yeah. It was harder to work then, I guess.

NP: Would you describe it as a safe job or an unsafe job?

WK: Well, it could be very dangerous, especially when you went up the road, like up on the mainline where we worked and went into sidings and that, but that was pretty good. That was an interesting job.

NP: Were there ever any incidents that you recall during your time? Or were you pretty lucky that--.

WK: Yeah, I was pretty lucky.

NP: There weren't accidents?

WK: Well, there was. One time we were coming back, I think, we were coming back from Kenora. We went by just west of Ignace, and there was a crew working, a rail crew, and they were changing ties and all that. When we got back into town, one of the guys got killed. A train ran into him. He was on a machine that lifted rails off, and he got hit by the train, and he was killed. We had to go and get this machine off the track, and he was there. He was dead.

NP: Something went wrong with the signalling or calling for whatever they call sort of for stoppage or--.

WK: Well, work crews usually have a TOP, they own the track, and the foreman has to cancel it before the train can go through. The train can't go through unless it gets permission from the person that's got that, and I don't know what happened there. There was, I guess, an investigation.

NP: An accident.

WK: But that was pretty--.

NP: But the yard itself was a pretty safe place?

WK: Yes, when we worked on the empties because we flagged it. We put flags and locked the switch. We used to put a flag up plus lock the switch. It was pretty safe. The only time it was dangerous was when we finished the train. We took the flags off so they could switch out the bad orders. That might have been a little dangerous, but you had to watch all the time.

NP: And yours wasn't anything like a--. We've interviews of some people who talked about working on the moving trains.

WK: That would--. Yeah.

NP: And they're walking along the top, and I'm thinking, "My God!"

WK: Yeah, that would be quite dangerous walking along the tops, especially if they humped. Yeah.

NP: Speaking of hump, there was a hump. Tell me what that was.

WK: That was where Westfort was originally. There was like a hump there. They had a tower there, and they had like a hill that went down. The cars came in--. I think it was called C Yard. The loads would come in, and that's where we inspected them, and

they would go. The tower would order--. They would go back with the units and go to the tail end, and they would hump. Say four cars would go to this--. They would hump them down the hill, and they would have switches there, and they would have a switchman. They would have guys riding them to put the handbrakes on them because that was--. The switchman would ride them. They usually would have about 20 guys riding them, and they would hump to all the different elevators. I guess they had certain cars going to certain elevators, like maybe wheat, oats, or whatever, and they would hump them, and they would go. They would divide them into all the tracks, and they would have to ride them down to make sure they didn't bounce off the track. So they put the brake on as they rode them down.

[0:30:51]

NP: And I'm surprised there weren't people injured left, right, and centre with that, but there weren't. I mean, there were some, obviously, but--.

WK: Yeah, the odd guy must have got hurt, but I don't remember hearing of any. But they used to do that pretty fast.

NP: I don't know if you paid much attention, when you first started, to the older guys that were working at the time talking about what it was like in the good old days. Do you recall at all how they described their work compared to what you had to do?

WK: Yeah. In the older days, where I worked, the carmen, they used to have to do everything by--. Like to lift the drawbars, two or three guys would have to pick them up and slide them in with a bar. As we got in my era, it started to change. They had machinery that could lift it up and put it in.

NP: A hoist of some sort?

WK: Yeah, a hoist to make it a lot easier. A lot of the jobs were easier. Plus, without the roller bearing wheel, which a lot of the--. The roller bearing wheel, the truck was easier to take apart because you would just lift it up, and you could roll the wheel out and just put an adapter in, and you're done. The other one had a wedge and a brass, which was a lot more—a journal pack. A lot more work to do. Some of them had like a spring plank in there to keep the truck together. It was a lot of work just to open them up and get the wheel out and put a new wheel in. It was a lot more work. Yeah. It was a lot different. A lot easier. You could change a wheel probably in less time.

Then also you had to clean the wheel when you had a plain bearing. They came with grease, like a tar on them. You had to sort of keep that off and get that to wash that off and get it all cleaned to make sure there was no scratches on it. And the brasses, make

sure there was--. When you had to take the brass out, they were quite handy. Check them. Yeah. Lot less work with the roller bearing.

NP: But at the same time, railroaders seemed to stay with the company for a long time. Like they had long careers, right?

WK: Yeah, I guess so. Yeah.

NP: Like in the elevators, one of their big issues was grain dust and things such as that. Were there any kind of environmental issues that you had to be aware of?

WK: I guess just noise.

NP: Oh, yes.

WK: Probably the pounding. Yeah. Noise. That's about all.

NP: What kind of safety equipment did you have to wear?

WK: Oh, they had the plugs and all that. Safety eyeglasses. We had all kinds of stuff. Helmets we had to wear, too, all the time.

NP: Did you have a toolbelt that--.

WK: No, we had a toolbox.

NP: Or a toolbox. So what kinds of things were in your toolbox?

WK: Wrenches, sledges, bars. A couple big wrenches and bars and a little pin hammer and a drift.

NP: What's a drift?

WK: A drift would--. To take out the cotter keys. It was like a point on the end of a stick to knock out the cotter keys so we could take out the yokes to pull the drawbars out and pull the yoke out. Retainers and all that. Yeah. It was pretty--. A lot of the other tools we'd get from the tool room. Yeah.

NP: Was that right on site?

WK: Yeah. In the shop. It was right on. When I first started in the old car shop, that was the old car shop they used to have--.

NP: In the same location?

WK: No. It was more in the middle of the yard there, and we used to do the paper cars there when I first started, and they used to change wood inside. The wood inside, nice wood. Then if the car was too rough, you'd put the liners, like cardboard lining around. Lined it. That was pretty nice. They used to sand the floors if they were too rough. They would have a sander, a big sander. It was pretty intense. Change decking, they used to do that quite a bit.

[0:35:10]

NP: Decking being--?

WK: The floor for paper cars. They would do that.

NP: So were there rolls of paper?

WK: Yeah.

NP: Like the big rolls that you see.

WK: Big rolls, yeah.

NP: How were those loaded, do you know?

WK: They had machines, like four-plex, that had sort of clamps on the side. They could load them pretty fast, the cars.

NP: Now you stayed in the carman's division for--?

WK: 33 years.

NP: 33 years. But you didn't move onto sort of a speciality of getting cars--.

WK: Roadwork I used to do.

NP: Roadwork. So tell me a bit about that job.

WK: That's where we would go up--. Say they would set a car off or a hot bearing or something, and we would have to go into the siding, get on the track, and drive up to the siding, get in the siding, and change the wheel. Lift the car up in the air and change the wheel or whatever it was set off for. Try to repair it, moved so they could pick it up.

NP: Was there any change in the technology that you used over the years that you were there?

WK: Yeah. They had these container cars or spine cars, which are five cars in one. They would have like five--.

NP: How are they connected.

WK: They were like this. They were 360 feet long, and a lot of them would have two containers on each one, or some would have maybe one big container and two small ones. So you'd have two, or you could have, well, two, four, six--. You could have ten loads on one car. Say, this wheel was hot.

NP: So the wheel in the centre was defective.

WK: Hot. So then you'd have to go into the siding, and you'd have to jack up. There was a truck in between, like a wheel here. One wheel here and one wheel here, and you had to jack it up. If this was up in the air, you would have to move all of these cars back, and then you'd lower this load down on blocks and then move the jacks over and jack this up, pull the truck out, change the wheel, put the truck back, and then try to pull this out, and try to hook it back up again. It had a big pin.

NP: So what would make that any different? Like the visual that you're using here, that unfortunately our--. Well, actually, I can take a picture of that. I will a little later. What's the difference between the connection between the pieces of, did you call it, a spine?

WK: A spine car. Yeah.

NP: And just in this case five different cars. What's the difference?

WK: Well, you couldn't take them apart. There was a big pin you had to pull out to lift them out. They never came apart. They were always together, the five. The car was 360 feet long. It was quite a bit of work to do on these.

NP: I bet, yeah.

WK: Sometimes they would have a couple of them set off to put together. It was pretty tense in the wintertime.

NP: Would they even fit on a siding?

WK: Oh, yeah. Sidings were--. Yeah.

NP: Were long?

WK: Yeah. But the snow was pretty high. [Laughs]

NP: So if you had a train derailment of, let's say, three or four grain cars, what happens then? Take us through how you learn about it and what you have to do right until you're right back to leaving the job.

WK: Well, in the yard, I remember one time they had grain trains in the yard, and we had to vaculate the cars out before we could lift them because they were on their side. So we vaculated them out, and then we came and loaded them, then we came with a crane, big crane, and loaded them up.

NP: So when you vacuum it, what do you vacuum it into?

WK: Vaculate, yeah. It was a giant. It had a line about ten feet wide, and you'd just stick it in, and it would suck the grain. It was like a vaculator. It was huge.

NP: And where would it take it?

WK: Into another car. We would have a car on the track, and we'd put the hose up on top and shoot it into the pocket. Then we had to change--. Once we loaded that pocket, we moved to the next pocket. It was pretty good. A lot of the trains, we tried to save the grain. They would save the grain if they could, but if the car was on its side, it was pretty hard to lift it up to get it back up. So they would do--.

[0:40:23]

NP: It would be impossible to lift it with the grain in, would you say?

WK: No, they could do it, but you'd probably need two cranes to lift it. A lot of times if they were on their side, they would just try to move it over.

NP: Now, if the derailment took place in the middle of nowhere, how do they get the cranes there?

WK: Well, say if a truck was gone between--. Say, we're looking here, and this is where the cranes would go up to where the track was, and they would try to start belting them.

NP: Yeah. But if you were in the middle of the bush and the derailment was there, what do you do? Like how does the crane get there?

WK: On the rail. It comes on the rail, and then just before it gets to the wreck, they switch it out because it would be back. The units would be at the front, and then they would do a switch out and put--. Let's say the unit's right here, and then they would switch it out, put the crane on the beginning of it, go up to where the wreck was, and maybe you could move a car over. But at the end, they started bringing in CATs and front-end loaders and moving. All that opened up. That changed at the end. They used another company—I think it was from the States—they started using--. They had one at, I think, it was at Dorion. They had about 33 cars in one year or 30 cars going off, and they brought them in from the States, and they just slid them all down into a field.

NP: So would the cars be wrecked because they just--? Like no salvaging of the cars, they just wanted to get it off the track.

WK: Oh, no. A lot of the cars they did salvage, and the trucks they salvaged, yeah. They did save a lot of them, but we weren't there to find out because it was a private company.

NP: What did you think about not having that job to do anymore? Was that a good thing, or you wished you could still do that kind of thing?

WK: Yeah, that was part of our job was putting them back on or pulling them off.

NP: Did you miss not doing that, having it farmed out?

WK: Well, it hurt us because it meant less of us to work, but it was better, I guess, for them safety wise and everything else. We did end up going there and helping, but not as many. Three or four of us went a couple times, and we were loading the trucks on. We had to count the trucks and save the wheels and all that. We saved all that kind of stuff and sent it back. We had to ship them back.

NP: Was grain ever left by the side of the railway, or was most of it pretty much salvaged as far as you know?

WK: Well, I guess the stuff that spilled on the ground, I guess the animals or the bears would have a good time, yeah. [Laughing] It used to be pretty intense when they start to--.

NP: That's what one person said about the effects of bringing in the hopper cars was there were a lot more hungry--.

WK: Grain along the tracks, yeah.

NP: A lot hungrier animals because there wasn't so much loss out along the track.

WK: That's right too because they--. You could see it. You got less and less. Yeah, even in C Yard you couldn't see as much because you could open the boxcar, and it would sit there. When you were inspecting, a lot of times you'd find that the grain was leaking out of the car because the car would bulge. The hoppers didn't leak as much. Yeah. I guess people used to sweep grain, I think, on the old boxcars. It would hit the walls, and the grain would come down, I guess. They used to go in there and sweep the grain out. Didn't see much of that after either.

NP: Were you there when the boxcars, when they were doing that?

WK: Well, I'd heard of it. I never saw it really. But--.

NP: That would be on the nighttime shift probably.

WK: Yeah. I guess the night shift would be there. I think that they did it more at Current River that they used to do that more because that's where a lot of boxcars were. I guess it was open. Yeah. Big changes.

NP: Big changes.

WK: Because the big hopper cars were 100 tonnes, and the boxcars were probably only 60-tonne or 40-tonne. That was a big difference.

[0:45:05]

NP: Now, if you think back, are there any situations—or just a general sense of your job—what would you say was most memorable about your job in your mind?

WK: Hm. Well, working with a lot of great guys. They were really good workers, a lot of them. Good friends, I guess, I knew at the time.

NP: Was it a good place to work mostly, would you say?

WK: Yeah, I enjoyed it. Yeah. It was nice.

NP: Any changes in working conditions over the time of your career, 30 years plus? Other than, as you said, the physical work got lighter.

WK: Yeah. It got easier because the--.

NP: Any other changes?

WK: Well, they would always meet the new safety requirements. Near the end too, they started with that checkered--. You had to wear the orange checker thing so you could see. Like when we were out in a siding, they could see us better when the trains come out. That was pretty good.

NP: So more emphasis on safety, then, over the years?

WK: Yeah. And they always went with that. We always had a safety meeting at least once a month. Always tried to keep us--.

NP: Did CP ever hire women for a carman's jobs?

WK: Yes, they did.

NP: Yeah?

WK: Jackie used to work here.

NP: How did that work? Jackie--?

WK: That lived on the house just on the corner from Miller's. There used to be a house there. She was hired. She was a carman trainee, but then they had a layoff, and she went out to Alberta, I think, to work on something. I don't know what happened to her, if she ever came back or--. Because she--. Yeah.

NP: I know in the grain elevator industry, it wasn't always a smooth transition to bring women into the job. Were there enough of them for you to notice whether they were accepted willingly or whether it was a tough--?

WK: Well, she was the only one that I knew as a carman helper or a carman trainee. Then I guess they hired so many, and then they had a layoff. That was the only one. I don't know if they have hired women since I left. I don't know.

NP: Yeah. I don't know as a carman--. I know a young semi-relative of mine is a conductor on--.

WK: Yeah. A switchman, yeah. A conductor, yeah. I could see that, engineer too. Probably they could do that. They can do all the jobs.

NP: Would a woman be able to do the heavy physical labour, would you say, of the carman's work? Especially at the time where, you know, I would see it might be difficult when you talked about the earlier days and all the physical work you had to do. But as you got more equipment that did that heavy work, would it be a job that women could actually physically handle would you say?

WK: Oh, yeah. I can't see why not. Well, not all men can handle, not all women--. So yes, I can't see why not. But would she want to do it? You see, a lot of women can do the job because it's a good paying job. Why wouldn't you want to?

NP: Yeah. Well, I would think that, as you said, a lot of men can't or wouldn't want to do it because they have options, and you've got a lot of cold weather or boiling hot weather. [Laughing]

WK: Yeah.

NP: Did that ever bother you, the cold weather or the hot weather?

WK: Yeah, both. Yeah, they did.

NP: Did you ever think of changing careers seriously?

WK: Probably did. Probably did, but just didn't. Probably just too lazy to do it.

NP: [Laughs] Or you enjoyed it, so why--?

WK: I enjoyed it. Yeah. I enjoyed it. I guess because when I went home, I didn't have to worry about my job.

NP: Did you always work shift work, or as you got more seniority did you--?

WK: No. As soon as I could, I jumped on day shift. I started off on--. Yeah. Days. But I didn't have very good days off, like I said. Monday, Tuesday, or something like that. Wednesday, Thursday, or something like that. But days was better. As long as I could work days because then you had the night off, and you slept good.

[0:50:08]

NP: Is there anything that you can add about grain elevators? Like did you take an interest in them at all? Did you ever tour one? What were your general feelings about them? Hated them? Loved them?

WK: Well, I used to have to go in and close doors or open doors. Sometimes the hopper wouldn't open, so you'd have to go in there and put big bars and ratchets trying to open the doors that stuck as they got older. They used to get iced up or something.

They would freeze because sometimes they had moisture in them, and then they couldn't open the door because they had the self-unloaders. Have you ever been in there when they used the machine? Sometimes they couldn't do it. Sometimes you had to do it the old-fashioned way with a bar and come along trying to ratchet it out. Yeah, I was doing that quite a bit. That wasn't a very good job. [Laughing]

NP: Did you ever take a tour of an elevator?

WK: No. Not really. Just when I was inside watching them dump. I've seen that.

NP: Did you see any of the elevators coming down?

WK: No, but there was a lot that have come down since I've been--. Yeah. Lots of elevators.

NP: And then they'd take up the track?

WK: Yeah, I guess they would. They took up the track from--. They used to have two main lines right from Ignace to here, and they took most of the main line out on one and shipped it down to the States somewhere, most of it. They just put longer sidings in. They used to have two tracks here going west to Ignace all the way, and they decided they didn't need two tracks. They just need one track. And they got longer sidings, like three-mile-long sidings. So one train would come up, and the train that was--probably the shorter train--would probably go into the siding, or depending what importance, it would go. They would get out and watch it by. That was their job. They would stop their train, and usually they'd watch them go by and give them a, "High! Okay!" Then they would jump in and go.

NP: I know there would be a difference in sizes, but what would be, let's say, an average length train? You were talking the siding being three miles long, but the train wouldn't be that long. How long would a train usually be?

WK: I don't know how long now because they got longer and longer. They've got bigger units now. I don't know how long they are or allowed to or limited to. The cars are longer. Like those spine cars are quite long. One car is 360 feet long when they're all hooked together, but they wouldn't load too many of them in one train. Because if you have to set them off--.

NP: Any memorable stories you'd like to add? Or you had a very uneventful--.

WK: Oh, a few. Cutting rail when we saw a wreck.

NP: Cutting rail?

WK: Yeah. It would be wrapped around the circle.

NP: Explain that a bit more. I'm sort of lost there.

WK: When the cars were--. When we were at the wrecks, the tracks would be all over the place, and the rail would be twisted around and caught in between stuff. So you'd have to cut the old rail to get it out of the way.

NP: How does that happen? Just the heat of the--?

WK: No. All the loads just start flying all over, and then you get rail all twisted around. They were moving pretty good, so you had to cut the rail. A lot of times, you had to watch that it wouldn't snap on you. Yeah, one time we were up on a truck and cutting, and it snapped. It sort of gave us a little scare, but we were pretty lucky. Yeah, lots.

NP: Did they give you training for that kind of thing?

WK: Yeah, the senior men on the wrecking used to train us. They were really good. The older guys, they would always tell us to watch out what to do. They took you under their wing. But we did lose one, actually, two—a young apprentice and a carman. They were lifting a car, and for some reason the car went--. I guess the load shifted inside, and it went. They went to run away, and they didn't just make it because they were running sort of up a hill, and it landed on both of them and killed them.

NP: Where was that?

WK: I don't know if that was--. I don't know where it was. Thank God I wasn't home that day and didn't get a call for that wreck.

NP: That would be tough to handle.

WK: Oh, yeah. He was a nice guy, Bill. Yeah. That was pretty dangerous. A lot of cars in the yard, they were pretty dangerous sometimes when you had to lift cars. You didn't know if something would snap, cable would snap, or the load. If you had the load up it might let go. I had that happen. We had the car up in the air at the siding. We had these hydraulic jacks, and for some reason, the hose just burst, and it just shot right by me. I'm lucky it missed me or all the hydraulic, it would've went right in. The load

came just down. We were lucky. No actually, once it came off, it just fell. It had a safety on it, but we had to fix the hose. That was pretty--.

[0:55:51]

NP: That was a near death experience.

WK: No. It was just a scary experience, that's all. There was a few. I'm trying to think of them, but they're--. I guess we put them out of our mind. We had a lot of cars that would set off, like the spine car. One guy set off. He says, "The car's making an awful noise." I went and looked at it. It was in Kenora. It was a spine car. We got the car in, and we looked. Here it was out of centre. It was out of where it was supposed to be, and it was slid back and cutting into the I-beam of the car. It went in about that deep. I don't know how it even made it without going off the track. It was just unbelievable some of the loads.

NP: So would it be the engineer that would sort of feel that?

WK: Well, I guess the train crews stopped it because it was making an awful racket, but they didn't notice that it was out of centre. I guess when they lifted the load off it, they lifted it up out of centre, and the truck rolled back. It was out of centre. There was like a pin that held it in, kingpin that held it in.

NP: Into position?

WK: Yeah. And I guess it came out, and they didn't notice it. But it came a long way. [Laughs] There were other loads that were off centre like that that we found.

NP: A lot of derailments would be the result of some issues related to the track?

WK: Or the wheels. Yeah. Sometimes the track might snap, or a beaver dam. I remember one wreck we went to. It was a beaver dam on the line that just took the whole thing. The crew came in, and there was no track there. It was just washed right out. And the train, they were pretty lucky.

NP: So what happened to them? They would just sort of head down into the ditch or--?

WK: Just sideways. They were all right. I don't think any crew got killed that I remember.

NP: Those beavers.

WK: Yeah. Well, it was raining hard. That was near--. That was just past Kaministiquia there.

NP: I'm assuming they have regular inspections.

WK: Oh, yes.

NP: I remember when I used to go fishing with my dad out in the country, and the guys would come back with those pump—that's how old I am—with the pump—

WK: Yeah, the carts. Yeah. I remember getting a couple rides up where we had to change--. Like a train line broke, and we had these emergency hoses we used to carry up the siding. But we met one guy in Niblock. It was up near English River there, Niblock. There's all sidings every--. He was just there, and he says, "Oh, I'll take you up." And he put the hose--.

NP: What were those things called, do you remember? The--.

WK: Pushcarts, I guess. No?

NP: I can't recall. I think they--.

WK: Then they had the gas ones too, but they used to have the other ones. The gas ones were something. I don't know how they ever started them. [Laughing] They used to get them off just in time with a train coming. Sometimes they would never get them. They would just wipe--. I guess they tried to beat the train or something. Jumped off.

NP: So they'd just lift them off? Like just lift them off the track?

WK: Yeah, they'd just--. They used to have two pulls. You could pull it out either way. You could pull out the front one or out the back, and then just pick them up, turn them, and lift them, and roll them. They'd just roll them out of--. Like they have rotary ramps. They were pretty intense.

NP: Yeah. And that would be the time before any kind of radio contact between who's on the track and in the trains.

WK: Yeah, yeah.

NP: So you just had to be real observant.

WK: Oh, yeah. In their timetable, they'd have to go by that lots. Yeah. But they have the signals. The signals would go red, yellow, or green, and if they had a red, they had to stop their train. If they had a yellow, they had to slow down to be able to stop the train. But a train takes a long time to stop. It would take, I bet you, better than a mile to stop. You can't just stop on a dime. That's the same if you were switching and you wanted to get into the yard. I remember our yard being at the little cross. You don't just climb up where they're switching and climb across and go across the line because if you slip, the guy can't stop the train right in the yard. It takes--. You'd cut your leg off if you--. You've got to watch.

[1:00:33]

NP: So I would assume there were some people who were daredevils.

WK: Even I did it until the guy said, "Listen." He explained it to me. I said, "Oh, my God. Yes, I see." So I stopped doing that. Yeah, you've got to watch. It's all right if the train was stopped to climb up and go over, but if it was moving don't climb over it. Yeah.

NP: But you came out of it alive and well.

WK: I guess the winter was the most dangerous because you'd slip on everything. There would be ice underneath. That was hard. You had so much clothing on too.

NP: Hard to work when you've got like big gloves and--.

WK: Yeah, yeah. It was, yeah. It was pretty intense.

NP: So I'm going to ask you a question that I don't know if you have any comments about it, but take a while to think about it. Canada started out having a Prairie full of nothing, and then as the--. I shouldn't say nothing. Nothing as far as grain was concerned, because obviously there were the bison and the Aboriginal people, but I'm thinking about the grain industry now--to

become one of the most important grain traders in the world. So when you think about the job you did here in Thunder Bay, what would you say about your contribution to helping Canada be a major grain trader?

WK: Hm.

NP: If you didn't do your job or you didn't do it well, how could that have screwed up things for Canada's grain trade?

WK: Well, it would have to be more than just me.

NP: Oh, yes. For sure, but--.

WK: The whole--. The railway.

NP: Yes. I'm talking about your crew. Say, the guys working on the crew.

WK: Yeah. I guess we got our trains done, got them out to get the grain back into Thunder Bay to load into the elevators every summer and all the way up to the fall time.

NP: Was there a pride in the work that you did?

WK: Oh, yeah. I think we enjoyed—once we got the train done—we really enjoyed when we finished the empties. We really enjoyed it. Of course, we were all young then. It was a nice time.

NP: Now, our hope as a group, the Friends of Grain Elevators—and in that we take the railways that got the grain here, and the ships that take it away, and then obviously the elevators and the handling of it—we wanted to keep that history alive. And it's more than history because it still goes on today. So when you think about the job that CP did to help that grain move, what kinds of things do you think we could feature at a, let's say, an interpretive centre if we ever were lucky enough to get that far?

WK: Hm.

NP: So that people had an understanding of the importance of the railways.

WK: I don't know. How many trains they let out in a year. I mean, the total number of trains that came in and out and how fast they turned over. The cars would turn over within--. Because once they got the cars empty back to the Prairies, they would load them and bring them back. There was both ends, so everybody had to work to get the grain going. That was pretty intense. There was lots of times--. Yeah.

[1:05:09]

NP: Did you ever travel on the railway out west? Use a pass from CP to travel?

WK: Yes, I did, to Winnipeg. I went on the passenger, though. That was pretty nice.

NP: That was pretty nice.

WK: But east is nicer, going out along the lake around Rosspport and all that. That was prettier, but that was when I was on the wrecking team. We used to look out. It was nice.

NP: Yeah. When I went on CP that way--. Or no, I guess it was Via, so I don't know if it's CN.

WK: Oh, yeah. Via, yeah.

NP: It was nighttime when we went that way, so I didn't get to see it. [Laughs]

WK: Yeah, that was pretty. I almost wish they'd put the passenger back on here.

NP: It would be nice.

WK: It seems so funny that the city of Thunder Bay is so huge, like the area around. I think you have to go up to Armstrong, don't you, to get on the train? It seems like a shame. I guess it doesn't pay.

NP: So is there anything else you'd like to add before I do a final check of my questions here to make sure that I've asked the questions? I haven't asked specifically what your major challenges were, but I think you can add to it. But certainly, you talked about weather being a major challenge and just the--.

WK: Yeah. We used to work out in the rain and the snow. It was cold. But we were dressed for it usually in the cold weather. You had to dress for it.

NP: You mentioned that when we were talking about women coming on staff and then the downsizing. What kind of impact did the downsizing have on the crews, would you say? Was there any?

WK: Well, it got me early retirement because they were downsizing, [laughs] and they offered us a buyout because they were going to lay off. I think five of us got a buyout at the time. Then I think they even gave five more after I left or right after because they downsized even more. But see, the people that we had working, they had to pay them their wages or 70 percent of their wages because they had their years in. So that's why I guess they offered us the buyout.

NP: Rather than paying you to do nothing?

WK: Yeah. Rather than pay the guys laid off nothing. So they had them working. It worked out pretty good.

NP: Any impact on morale at all, did you notice?

WK: The only time I really did morale was when they brought a job from Sudbury down here. They transferred about 30 guys into things, so they had to go like this to bring in your seniority.

NP: Meshed the workforces and people were--.

WK: Wherever seniority went, you went. That was maybe for some of the senior guys--. But now, I bet you it's pretty changed, pretty good now because almost all of us retired.

NP: Did many people move from Thunder Bay elsewhere? Sort of--.

WK: Yes. A few times they brought guys in from Winnipeg, they got a closed down, and then they went back. There's been a little bit of transferring of guys. Like in Sudbury they transferred a job down that was concentrate cars they were working on.

NP: What kind of cars?

WK: Concentrate. It was almost like a--. I don't know what kind of material in it. Heavy. It looked almost like a clay, but I think it was zinc or something. Really heavy stuff, material, and they would strip the cars right down and rebuild them right from the--. It was big work. They did it, the guys from Sudbury. Everything, they did it.

NP: Yeah. I think that we have covered pretty much everything.

WK: Mmhmm.

NP: Did you ever take any pictures of work you did? Or was there anybody--.

WK: I did, but I never kept any of the pictures.

NP: Ah!

WK: I had quite a few of them.

NP: Were there any guys on the job who were photographers and loved taking Photographs that you can think of that might have kept their collection?

WK: Yeah. I don't know. I'll ask if I see them.

NP: So you're a member of the retirees association?

WK: No, I'm not.

NP: No?

WK: No, I didn't.

NP: When you left, you left.

WK: Yeah. I just left. I just walked out. I should go see.

NP: Any other people who are good storytellers that you think we might interview?

[1:10:00]

WK: Way better than me. [Laughs]

NP: No. Some people just are--. Their dad or their grandad or both were on the railway, and they just sat there and paid attention to all the stories. If you think of anybody, let me know. But thank you very much. I'm glad we got this interview done. I know I've been threatening you for a couple years now. [Laughs]

WK: Intense.

NP: So.

WK: Okay.

NP: Okay. We'll just conclude it now.

End of interview.