

Narrator: Phillip LeBrun (PL)

Company Affiliations: C. D. Howe Company,

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Interviewer: Nancy Perozzo (NP)

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Summary: Retired heavy civil and marine construction contractor Phillip LeBrun discusses his interactions with Thunder Bay’s grain elevators throughout his career. He first describes his career travelling in the pipeline construction business before moving to Fort William as a mechanical contractor with C. D. Howe Company, working on elevator expansion projects for Canada Malting, Manitoba Pool 3, and P&H Elevator. He tells memorable stories from the construction jobs, like having to re-drive wooden piles at P&H, discovering bad batches of concrete, and using Swedish slip form equipment. He also tells the story of finding rotten wood piles under Paterson Elevator, leading to the decision to demolish the elevator. LeBrun then shares the story of his involvement in the Empire Elevator demolition by explosion. He describes bidding on the project, recruiting his explosives expert colleague, quietly setting up the dynamite charges, and exploding the elevator. He recalls the removal of the historic steam engine from the elevator by a group of volunteers, the burying the rubble on the site in the explosion’s hole, and the filming of the explosion by Walter Cronkite. Other topics discussed include his involvement with breakwater construction and his father’s involvement with designing and constructing the Seabar boxcar dumper.

Keywords: C. D. Howe Company; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Grain elevators—design and construction; Grain elevator demolition; Grain elevators—Equipment and supplies; Grain elevator explosions; Concrete slip forming; Wooden pile driving; Canada Malting Elevator; MPE Pool 3; Parrish & Heimbecker Elevator; Empire Elevator; Dynamite demolition; Steam engines; Boxcar dumpers; Searle Elevator; Breakwater/breakwall

Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: It is September 24, 2014, and we are sitting in the home of our narrator for today. I’ll have him introduce himself. We’re in Thunder Bay, Ontario. So, if you could introduce yourself, and just tell us a little bit about your connection to grain elevators.

PL: My connection to grain elevators is I spent three years with C.D. Howe, where we did the new addition on Canada Malt, Manitoba Pool, and P&H [Parrish & Heimbecker] elevator. With Howe, I was working under a John McNeil, who had been with Howe since 1928. His job was field chief, between an engineer and a builder, the contractor, at all times.

NP: Could I have you say your name, so that we have that on record?

PL: Oh, my name is Phillip LeBrun. Yeah.

NP: The only other item that we had talked about before the interview was you also had a connection with elevator demolition.

PL: Well, we had a connection, according to Walter Cronkite and that from NBC or CB, whatever the hell it was. We took down the Empire Elevator, but nobody had taken down an elevator in one shot.

NP: Okay. Can we come back to that? Because I'd like to start the interview with just talking about your beginnings.

PL: I was a contractor and they wanted to get—the people that owned it—wanted to take it down.

NP: But even if we go right back to the beginning, were you born in Thunder Bay?

PL: Oh, lord, no.

NP: So, where--?

PL: I was born in Winnipeg and spent a lot of time in the United States in the pipeline industry and, you know, construction.

NP: So, how did you end up in Thunder Bay?

PL: Well, I was--. [Laughs] That's rather unique. I was working for Missouri Dredge & Dock, which did river crossings. We were doing river crossings in various states for the gas companies. I probably covered most states. I ended up in Canada, in Vancouver. We had two—Trans-Canada pipeline I think it was—they had two crossings under the Fraser River. Okay? In the meantime, my wife was living at home. Earlier, when we did the pipeline from the border to in the United States 326.7 miles, we were living in Bemidji. Now, there's a lot I can't remember really detailed.

NP: That's fine! Doesn't need to be, just gives us a sense of how you--.

PL: We were living in Bemidji. I was always on the road. Then when that line finished, I went to Arkansas with the company. My wife was--. Because with pipelining you keep moving, you don't have two weeks on, two weeks off or anything like that. So, she said, "That's enough!" [Laughing] "That's it. I quit." So, she went back to Winnipeg. I was in BC, and they wanted me to—the company wanted me, that is—to after that finished, to go to take over a new company in Mexico. Mind you, I had constant telephone with my wife. I was figuring out--. And she said, "Wow." That was bad.

[0:06:06]

NP: Not quite what she had in mind? [Laughs]

PL: Yeah, she didn't have in mind Mexico. But I didn't really--. I said, "I think I've got to quit this pipeline thing because I don't want to lose my two little kids and my wife." My wife moved here to Fort William with my father and my mother, who were developing a dumper for the grain business. [Laughing] And I know that's a little odd, but.

NP: No, that's very interesting! So, how did your dad get involved with that?

PL: How did he get--?

NP: Yeah, how did your father get involved with--?

PL: Oh, it was on the design and the manufacturing and the rigging and making it work.

NP: Was that the Seabar dumper, do you know, with C.D. Howe?

PL: No, no.

NP: Okay, because there were two of them developed.

PL: I first thought it was--. They put it in, over there in Westfort at one of the big elevators.

NP: The Grand Trunk?

PL: I can't remember.

NP: I think, yeah, yeah.

PL: Yeah, they put it in there. Anyway.

NP: What was your dad's background?

PL: He was a mechanical designer around anything mechanical, big. Yeah.

NP: Did he work for a company here, or was he just coming on his own?

PL: No, he was hired by the Searle. Searle! I got it!

NP: Searle, okay! Yes, okay.

PL: I got it, I got it! Boy, if my wife was sitting here, she would have hit it. [Laughing] Searle Grain put in that, wherever the hell that was. I didn't pay much attention when I was up there. Then I came back here to Fort William. It was only Fort William when I came back here. Port Arthur was over there. I worked for several companies.

NP: What was your background? Did you have any official training in construction?

PL: I'm like Murray Fleming, who is the president of C.D. Howe. He didn't have a--. He was educated. His engineering came from the United States and they would--. He ignored them.

NP: He couldn't get the transfer of his papers?

PL: Yeah, get the Canadian. Well, I never worried about that. I didn't care because nobody wanted me to be a design engineer or anything like that. They wanted me for experience, machine experience, you know, heavy equipment. But anyways, C.D. Howe wanted me when I came here. [Laughs]

NP: Did you meet him?

PL: No, I never met him. I only met John McNeil. Now, John McNeil had all the outside work for all the years since 1928 for C.D. Howe. John McNeil hired me, and we worked good together.

[0:10:03]

NP: Can you recall who else was at C.D. Howe at the time?

PL: Sure, Murray Fleming.

NP: Was he the head guy?

PL: He owned it didn't he?

NP: Probably, when Mr. Howe went into politics.

PL: Oh, sure! I think Murray owned it. There's Harry Olsen, the second chief. They had an electrical designer, Syd Halter. I think he died a few years ago.

NP: What projects were they working on when you first--? Well, first of all, when did you come here? When did you move here to join your wife?

PL: My wife wrote it down somewhere.

NP: Approximately.

PL: I'll have to find that piece of paper.

NP: Do you want to just put it on pause? **[Audio pauses]** Want to put that on? So, that was '57 to 1960, because you said you were with them for three years. What were they working on at the time?

PL: Canada Malt was the first, that's where I went. John was running the outside period. They had several things going. I was his assistant.

NP: What were they doing at Canada Malt, putting in the malt plant?

PL: Put that big extension this way, putting all the machinery and everything in. The four tanks in between for--. Then we were doing Manitoba Pool.

NP: Which one?

PL: The one that's right beside, right next to--.

NP: P&H [Parrish & Heimbecker]?

PL: No, P&H is way down at the other end.

NP: Oh, right beside the Canada Malt.

PL: Canada Malt, yeah.

NP: Okay, yeah. Pool 3, I think that was.

PL: Pool 3, yeah, I wouldn't remember that.

NP: So, you said you came to Thunder Bay—Fort William—from your experience with pipeline installation.

PL: Yeah, but with the pipeline there's a lot of other work. There's the pumping stations, huge pumping stations, small pumping stations. There's the river crossings and a lot of various work. We did a lot of blasting, a lot of--.

NP: Underwater work too?

PL: Yeah, and underwater work.

NP: So, there is a transfer to elevator work.

PL: For me it was. But after I did one climb, you know, of the thing, I had no problem. But in the meantime, John went to the hospital, and he never came out. Murray Fleming asked me—well, he phoned my wife—because she said he said, “Will you have him phone me?” So, I was doing a crossing with an American pipeline company in Northern Ontario, so I phoned him. He said, “I’d like you to--. John, you and him, you seem to be the same. I really want to see this P&H through. You know there’s been problems.” “Yes,” I said, “I know there’s problems. I see it. I’m coming up. I ran lines on them, but they didn’t do nothing about it.” He says, “Would you be interested?” I said, “Sure! Because you know, we’re not going to be there forever.”

NP: So, what was the job with P&H? What were they doing?

PL: Oh, P&H was all those new tanks.

NP: Okay. Outwards there, right?

[0:15:04]

PL: Yeah, it came towards inland, see? It came inland, and I remember they had a long dock there that ships could tie up, but there was no--. The elevators were back there. So, they had problems.

NP: What kind of problems?

PL: Well, you know, when you start driving pilings. That dock was built, that long dock--. I don’t know when the hell it was built.

NP: Probably late 1910s or early 20s.

PL: You could find out, but I haven’t--. But I know one thing, it was all wood and that. Before I had left—before they had even got the contractor—I had gone to do that crossing for Missouri Valley, who were operating in Canada. [Laughs] Anyway. I had ran a line, and had it set up, and I turned it over to a young engineer. A young guy, he wasn’t an engineer yet—I guess he is now. I turned it over to him because I got a leave because they hadn’t awarded anything. But I said that, “There’s movement in that dock, in that thing. There’s movement. I believe that if you start piling--.” The wooden piling, you know, was generally about a 40-foot friction pile. You’d drive it down, and you’re going to shove that--. Well, I don’t know what happened, but I had left him to Joe, the young guy. The information, he gave it to Olsen at the office. But anyway, the contractor, finally it was let. The contractor went ahead as you always do. You start here, and you drive towards the water. They were driving the wooden piling and the dock started moving, like moving. [Laughs]

NP: Vibrating sort of, or actually moving out?

PL: No, no, moving out like that. But I didn't know about that. I ran the line saying that there'll be movement and it's under. "You're going to have to do various other things besides while you're driving the pile." But anyway, I wasn't there anymore, so I didn't care. But when Murray Fleming phoned, and I phoned him back, they had already put a--. They got to stop. So, I came back, pull out all the piles that--. Carter Construction from Toronto was their contractor, but Thunder Bay Harbour was doing the driving.

NP: That's pretty pricey to pull it out? But you had to.

PL: Well, it's not hard to pull. You've got to have enough crane--. But he had enough crane power because he had a steam--. Thunder Bay Harbour had that steam, and their yard was right there, you see. You get lots of power with a steam. They pulled them out. Now, the system that you've got to use is you can't re-drive those piles. You've got to have another batch because you've already hammered the hell out of them. So, what you do is you start your driving, and you start excavating at the inner side of the dock where the material, where it's all bunching. Just keep excavating until you get your piles in.

[0:20:02]

NP: What type of wood were the piles? Was there a special type that was the best sort of?

PL: Well, it was just forestry wood. It was just the white pine, eh?

NP: From this area?

PL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They get them--. A lot of them were coming maybe from 30, 40 miles. But they were a friction pile. The difference between a friction pile and a--. If you've got the right material down below—clay, that is—it's solid. When you get to that point, and you take 40 bangs on that hammer, that creates a friction pile. Now you try and pull that out, it's hard! You've got to have a lot of horses to get it out. Not only that, it'll take any load. Most of the piles were loads for maybe 10, 40, 50 tonne, but you can put 140 tonne on a pile. So, they drove the piles, and we put up the tanks, put it up. I had experience, of course, with the hydraulic jacks that were Swedish. They were patented in Sweden in 1890 or something. [Laughs] [Mumbles] We climbed it and--. Carter was happy, I was happy. The Prosvita was right across the street for lunch. [Laughing]

NP: Et cetera, et cetera. [Laughing]

PL: It worked very well, and the dock was, you know, we just ran a line behind it and left the dock. Because the dock isn't going to carry anything other than people walking down it. That was the end of that. So, I left and went contracting on my own.

NP: Was there anything that caused you to leave C.D. Howe?

PL: I thought C.D. Howe, they didn't have much work. They had that big deal going on at Argentina, and you keep looking at me, see? Like all I want, I could hardly wait to get to Argentina. [Laughs]

NP: Not? [Laughing] It was just that much farther than Mexico!

PL: Yeah! It would have been bad enough there.

NP: So, the project in Argentina, was that the grain elevator there?

PL: Oh, yeah. I forget who took it over. One of the guys in the office of C.D. Howe. He was second to Olsen, but I didn't know him. I wasn't really familiar. Unless I was dealing with a subject that when I came to the office, I had to talk to somebody about it, needed some correction or something, you know what I mean? Otherwise, I never had much--.

NP: You were almost a private contractor there.

PL: Yeah. I wasn't highly interested in office people. [Laughs]

NP: And office politics.

PL: Yes, and there's lots of it.

NP: The Manitoba Pool elevator project, what was--? Was that installing extra bins as well?

PL: You know, when we finished the P&H elevator, the Prince Arthur Hotel had a dining room just one floor--. You know? They had a big meeting, and, as a matter of fact, there was a Howe official from Montreal came. I was rather surprised. I met an old guy, and his name was C.D. Howe. He was really old. But that's the last I was--. I wasn't going anywhere. I was going to stay right here.

[0:25:33]

NP: So, let's just talk about grain elevators in general, then. Before we move on, you mentioned the patented system that, did you say it was Swedish?

PL: Oh, the jacks.

NP: Yeah, now I understood was that for pouring concrete? Jacking up the forms?

PL: Yeah, well, what happened, you had these hydraulic jacks that were on the rods, eh? They lift the forms. Your forms are only, say four or five feet.

NP: I understood that that hydraulic jack system was actually patented in Canada. Was this a different system do you know?

PL: Yeah, it was robbed in Canada. [Laughs] The jacks actually belonged to the Swedes, but they didn't do anything.

NP: Really?

PL: Yeah.

NP: Because I was just reading an article this morning where they were talking about the two fellows who worked for, what was it, oh, Barnett Record maybe? Or Stewart Company of Canada? They actually gave the names of the couple of fellows who supposedly had designed it for the elevator in 1906 or something.

PL: Yeah, but there was several different you could use. But there was only one that I would buy, even to this day, and that's the single rod, the jack that you can control just like that. You know what I mean? Everything has to go up, no! You can't do that when you're pouring concrete. You've got to be able to control it, and you've got to control every jack. That's the secret. That's why P&H went up like--.

NP: Describe the process there then, because let me just tell you what pictures I've seen of elevators that were built—oh, if you were working at the end of the '50s—these were being built in the early '20s. So, that's 30 years. They were still rolling wheelbarrows around, dropping cement off. How had things improved when you were working on building the silos?

PL: Well, we had a system, you know, the tower. The concrete truck dumps in there, and we got a [inaudible] system running each.

NP: Sort of a conveyor belt system?

PL: Well, it was a Canadian--. Yeah, I guess you could call it a conveyor belt, but actually it was just a slide.

NP: So, does the tower go up then as the--?

PL: No, you control that. That's a secret. If you take her too green, as they used to call it, you might have what you call a fallout.

NP: Too green being putting new wet concrete on top of stuff that's not sufficiently set?

PL: Well, one of the big problems they had was Canada Cement. I cut them off, but I got an engineering outfit that was doing the Nelson River dam there. Seven years it took them to build that. I got one of their engineers to come in and test Canada Cement. There was four cars of cement on the thing, eh? They went and tested it, and they said it'll destroy the five-one ratio content. "You can't use that." It's so hot, it dissolves the water. So, I cut it off, but I knew this was going to hit the van. Threatening and every other damn thing. I was getting a little sick of it. I don't mind a good fight. Murray Fleming sat there in Montreal and said, "You got to with LeBrun. My god, he's got all the evidence! Change the cement company." That's what we did.

[0:30:39]

NP: So, who took over? What cement company? Was Irwin Cement around at the time?

PL: I can't remember the name. But they had their building right on the river there. It's still there. It's cement. There's St. Lawrence, and I can't remember.

NP: Right on Pacif--. No, whatever that goes over the bridge and onto the island?

PL: Yeah, yeah. But.

NP: There was an Irwin Cement company.

PL: Irwin. Irwin was--. The mixer did the--. But it wasn't his fault.

NP: He was sort of the truck and the delivery.

PL: He had the delivery truck and he brought it, and then you test it, no. But then you start seeing that your--. Your climb, things don't feel right. Stop everything.

NP: So, that's where your experience comes in handy.

PL: So, I got this--. I can't remember the name. They're a hell of a big outfit in Winnipeg. They had that seven-year dam contract, and that whole dam is nothing. What is it? Concrete. They knew every angle. The guy came here. I didn't have permission from Howe yet, but I thought I better cover my own butt. I brought him in, and he tested the cars. He said, "What's happened is they didn't let it stand long enough when they conditioned it." However, what he called it by different names. I didn't care.

NP: I have an interest in concrete and cement, so the test you were talking about that they would look at was beyond a slump test then?

PL: Oh, yeah. The destruction--. You see, there's a five, he called it a number five program. It violated it so bad, it was so hot, that when you did put water in it--.

NP: Steam rises.

PL: Right! [Laughing]

NP: But the project was finished, and were P&H happy?

PL: Yeah, P&H that's the name. P&H! Anyway, at this Prince Arthur thing, all kinds of booze and drinks and everybody. Big party! I think it was a Heimbecker, they took turns operating their business. There's two families. There's the Parrish family. I'm only listening to the conversations. This guy was Heimbecker, was a good guy. Easy-going. I never heard anything bad about the elevator since.

NP: Can I tell you a quick story about the elevator? Because we interviewed Mr. Parrish.

PL: Oh, yeah?

NP: I think it was when an elevator tipped into the river, or into the lake, that I think that might have started an examination of the stability of the elevators along the waterfront.

PL: Oh, yes!

NP: So, P&H brought in engineers to take a look at how solid their elevator was, and there was a report done—don't know who did it—saying that the elevator was tipping. Mr. Parrish didn't think it would be tipping, probably knew the good work that you did, and had another engineer brought in. As it turned out, I guess they were using the breakwater as one of their sitings, and it was determined that the breakwater was moving and not the elevator! So, [laughs] you did a good job!

[0:35:36]

PL: I didn't want to name anybody or take--. Everybody makes--.

NP: Everybody makes mistakes, yes. The secret is being able to admit it, right?

PL: Have you not noticed even lately when that mall down east, how many engineers checked that?

NP: When it collapsed?

PL: How undecent! When I went with Bill Peach, who was second in command at C.D. Howe, over to the river over by the swing bridge. Do you remember the elevator that was there?

NP: The Paterson one?

PL: Yeah! He said, "We're going to look. Something's going--. There seems to be movement." I says, "Well, where there's movement it's going to continue." But he says, "What would be the easiest way?" I says, "On this one, there's a separation where you could get at least five and a half feet of working area to get to that four foot of concrete floor," I said, "Bill." So, he says, "You look after it. I'll drill—get Thunder Bay Harbour, they've got one of those drills—and we'll check, and we'll find out."

NP: Was this on the dock?

PL: This was under the mill, under the tanks.

NP: So, what do they call them? The beds sort of?

PL: Yeah, yeah. So, what we did was we drilled, and we found out that the earth had left the pile. Now, the pile rots, you know. That's 401603, that's it. It's got to maintain that, otherwise--. There was as much as three feet, two feet under. So, they stopped. They shut down that elevator. I gave the report to Bill Peach. [Inaudible] get around.

NP: So, when you say there's two feet or three feet, the piles are rotting?

PL: They are rotting down, yeah, because the material is going out through the dock.

NP: What would prevent that?

PL: What would prevent it?

NP: Is that when they do something--. Like Monika and I spent a lot of time scanning in pictures of a revetment of a dock at Searle Elevator. So, is revetment what would fix that problem or at least stop it from getting worse?

PL: Yes. But it was too late. That's too late. How are you going to renew those piles? No, it was too late. They shut it down. Lucky they did because that's where the swing bridge is and that would be a lot of fun, eh? [Laughs] To see what in the elevator goes on, takes the CNR [Canadian National Railway] out. They'll be in court. They'd probably be fighting for the next 20 years!

NP: So, that could explain why they actually demolished the elevator then.

PL: Yeah. What they did is they put it up for bid to demolish. I wasn't interested in it. No, I wasn't interested in it because of the fact of that damn bridge! I can dump them, but I'm not so happy about that bridge. And never have been! [Laughing]

NP: Well, you see, you might have done everybody a favour!

[0:40:01]

PL: [Laughing] Yeah, put the bridge in there too, eh?

NP: We're referring to the current day issues of rebuilding or fixing up the bridge after the fire.

PL: Well, yes. I know I haven't--. The railroad committed--. I mean, how they're getting away with it--. I know why they're getting away with it because the federal government backing all heavy industry. If you want to violate labour, violate this, go ahead and do it, but do it--. That bridge is related to Indians, and we've got a Prime Minister who figures they shouldn't be around anymore. That is the truth.

NP: Now, before we get to the Empire Elevator—which is a special story—I just want to get your sense of, if you have any, about-- . What did you think of the grain industry in Thunder Bay when you came here and started working on these things? Just sort of general thoughts, because you came from Winnipeg, right?

PL: Well, I came from Vancouver. I thought that to here--. Well, I didn't go to Winnipeg. I came here because my wife had. I thought the grain industry, at one time, Canada was shipping more grain out of Thunder Bay than any place in the world. It was just money, money, money, money. Then there was this slow down, and then it picked up again. I kind of thought it was like papermills. Of course, you can't say anything because everybody was raised somehow with somebody who worked in a papermill, who got you a job, your kid a job, or that. But from my travels, there was a lot of independents. Like in the southern United States, there was only three papermills, but in less than two or three years there was five. You know? It's going to take its toll on us.

NP: Sort of overdevelopment.

PL: Yeah. That's what I thought, but I didn't say anything because--.

NP: What did you think about—and we'll go back to the elevators now because you had a mechanical and construction background—what did you think about sort of their operations?

PL: I thought as far as the operator's job and their dust control and everything else, I thought they were the best in the business. The guys that are still working at them—some of them, well, most of them are dead—but they got new crews. But the elevators are well-run. There was no, what I ever noticed, especially P&H and Canada Malt and Manitoba Pool, everything. I couldn't knock it. But I wasn't an expert on it. I never had--. Just putting them up is one thing but running them is another thing too. You've got to have the people that are conscientious. And it's a 24-hour day! A lot of those things are shifts.

NP: This is sort of wrapping up the earlier discussion about your dad, so did your dad stay on here then after he finished his work on the Seabar dumper?

PL: Yeah, they got the dumper in, but my dad died in there. He's buried over there. Yeah.

NP: Mountainview? By the mountain?

PL: You know where that cemetery is when you're going--?

NP: Off by the papermill?

PL: Yeah.

NP: Mountainview, or St. Patrick's I think is there too. A two-in-one.

PL: I've been in there for a funeral for my mom. I put the stone there. When I was in Europe, I liked going around looking at the numbers on the stones that are crooked. During my experience over several times where they did not know where the graveyard ended in the slide when we were running a pipeline through. My god, there's bodies!

[0:45:55]

NP: Ah, running--.

PL: Did you ever see a person that's been dead for say 70, 30, 50 years?

NP: Only in horror movies.

PL: [Laughs]

NP: Is that pretty much it?

PL: Pretty close! You know how they say, "Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes." That's what happens.

NP: Well, we need to do a whole new series on pipeline installations! [Laughing]

PL: No, no, no. But I will just say, we didn't make too much noise about it. We're a bad bunch.

NP: That'll slow you up for a month or two, to bring it to peoples' attention.

PL: Yeah, some of them. [Laughs]

NP: I should've mentioned it before, but if you can try not hitting the table because this is a very sensitive thing and--.

PL: Oh, I'm sorry!

NP: That's okay! I didn't want to interrupt you. But since we're heading into the Empire Elevator story, I'll probably hold your hands. [Laughing]

PL: All right!

NP: Now, as I mentioned to you, I got your name because I was reading some background information on the Empire Elevator and particularly the demise of the Empire Elevator, which was 1971.

PL: '71, yeah.

NP: Right. So, talking to you on the telephone, you had mentioned the background history to that. But just tell us the story of how you got involved, who was working with you, and then I'll ask you some specific questions about the actual job. So, how'd you get involved?

PL: I bid it! They put it up for--. They wanted it down. I can't remember the name of the people that own it.

NP: Did the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool still own it?

PL: I don't think so.

NP: Yeah, because they bought it in 1966.

PL: Because they didn't pay taxes or something. There's something more to it than that. They wanted it down. I didn't care! But everybody takes some buildings down with cranes, balls, and everything else. I thought, "Boy." I got a hold of my old buddy.

NP: Who was your old buddy and how was he your old buddy?

PL: How old was he?

NP: No, just how did you meet him?

PL: From pipeline. He used to do a lot of marine blasting and so on.

NP: What was his name?

PL: Jack Loizeaux. The actual story was I didn't tell anybody what I really was going to do because that would cause a lot of trouble with Imperial Oil, and then everybody else it managed. So, I quietly got a hold of Jack and--.

NP: Ah. Pause.

[Audio pauses]

PL: And he was trying to--. He was having a lot of trouble with the insurance companies.

NP: Okay. So, are we ready to go?

MM: We're on, sorry.

NP: Oh, okay! Yes, sorry.

PL: Okay?

NP: Yeah! Could you start again, just so that--?

[0:49:54]

PL: Yeah, Jack, actually he's from Baltimore, or was from Baltimore. But I got a hold of him, and we had a little discussion. I said, "I got an elevator." He said he couldn't work here. "I'm having a hell of a time for insurance." I said, "Don't worry. I got insurance." [Laughs] He says, "Yeah?" I says, "Sure!" So, he flew in and stayed here. Him and I kept it on the low. We looked at it and we started drilling. Just two drills, but they were the right kind.

NP: So, how do you decide where to drill to give you a good sense of what you're dealing with?

PL: Well, this one was beautiful. But what I thought was when they built it, they had perimeters with concrete beams going right across. Right across. It was like shooting fish in a barrel! So, when he seen that, "Boy," he says, "we could put this wherever."

NP: Now, when they had the beams going across, does that mean they didn't have that bed that other elevators had? Or that was the foundation for the concrete floor?

PL: No, that was for the floor because you could get under it. We didn't get under it. We took it from the side, outside. Well, nobody paid much attention to us because here's a guy working on a drill and another guy over there. They didn't know. Nobody was asking us what the hell we were doing.

NP: Did you have to do any work in the water at all?

PL: None.

NP: None?

PL: No.

NP: Two drills? Two core samples, sort of? [Laughs]

PL: Two drills, yeah. Then we got a truckload of dynamite and the caps and the whole thing. It took us 31 hours to load it up. But then, also, if you remember when you were looking at this--.

NP: At the article.

PL: At the article. There was a stack and there was a house here with a steam engine in it that ran a rope-drive that ran the elevator. So, we figured, “Well, we’ll take it all. We’ll send that over here.” Then when we finished, our measuring thing was right there. That was just like you’re looking across there, the street, at one of those trees. It was sitting there. We said, “If this goes right, [laughs] if this goes right, the whole building should end up maybe scattered around that pole,” which is right there.

NP: In the picture.

PL: That’s it right there.

NP: Now, what--? So, then the--.

PL: There’s the pole right there.

NP: Yeah. So, it would seem to me then--. No. What is the most critical thing then to get it to do what you wanted it to do?

PL: Well, you got water on that side, you’ve got water in the back, and you’ve got the dock. What you want to do is you want to have everything like this table. You want it to all go like this, and it all sounds like one bang, you know? And that’s what it did sound like. A lot of people watched it, I guess. Because Jack figured, “Nobody’s ever knocked down the grain elevator in the States. Either they take big machines and balls. You know that. Knock all the--.” But he says, “This will be a beauty!” So, he got a hold of one of those guys that had been watching some of his work, and they got a hold of Walter Cronkite. Walter Cronkite says, “Wow! That would be a beauty, yeah? Yeah, we’ll go along.” They put in their--. When they came here, they had the top floor of that Royal Edward Hotel, right? Anyway, we already had it loaded.

[0:55:43]

NP: So, they took photographs of it?

PL: Yeah. This is their photographs. That’s not mine. I didn’t have any. The newspaper. I didn’t even have a camera.

NP: But Cronkite’s--.

PL: Yeah, they had a helicopter right at the--.

NP: Is that what that is at the top of the photo? Of course it is! [Laughing] I thought it was a speck on the paper!

PL: No, no, it was a helicopter. They had a crew.

NP: So, they just hovered around?

PL: Yeah.

NP: No danger to them sitting up on top of a--?

PL: No, no, nothing goes up. Nothing went up. Everything went this way.

NP: Ah! Now, I guess when I ask the question about “What are critical items?” I would assume where you place the dynamite was a pretty specialized--?

PL: Well, we had a—which we always used—was a steel-reinforced box. That’s it. That’s what the dynamite right off the truck goes in there.

NP: Just one box or it gets places in different places?

PL: Well, this was only a tonne.

NP: So, one box sitting somewhere in the elevator?

PL: Yeah. No. CIL [Canadian Industries Limited] got us the box. The Canadian Industry, they supplied the dynamite.

NP: And then what do you do with the dynamite?

PL: We put it in. We took it out as we were loading it.

NP: And where would you put it?

PL: Into those holes that we drilled. They fit perfect, eh? With the timing chords on them.

NP: How many holes were eventually drilled then to take the dynamite?

PL: I never counted them, but I would say there was 85. Yeah.

NP: Placed just sort of--?

PL: Right straight under. The whole underneath.

NP: Just every 20 feet or--?

PL: Yeah, something like that.

NP: So, some kind of measurement. Not just where you felt like putting them.

PL: Yeah. And that was easy, the stack. The steam warehouse there that ran the thing, that was easy.

NP: So, if we take a look at the picture here which shows the elevator almost coming down completely and the stack starting to turn, if you wanted this stack to fall here—which it did—you'd put your dynamite here?

PL: Yeah. We had this area here was loaded, and then we had the shifters, what they call the shifters. When that starts going off, and the shifters were so everything doesn't go into the water, right?

NP: What are shifters?

PL: They're little fuses that are electric handled, and you can time them right to the split second. You can handle them with a dial box. We didn't bother. We just lined them up because the building is just a brick building.

NP: And then is it like you see on TV? You press down the handle and away they go?

PL: No.

NP: So, how's that set up? [Laughs]

PL: We had just a little hand one.

NP: Detonator, is that what they were called?

PL: Mmhmm. It was all charged.

NP: Is it timed?

PL: Oh, yeah. It's rigged right to the wiring, and it's tested all the time. It's reading all the time. Just press it and there goes everything. It went perfect because the pole is still exactly there. We had told them that it's got to--. We got lots of laughs. "You guys are mental!" [Laughing] Then there was other bad names too.

[1:00:18]

NP: I'm curious. When you put in your bid for the dismantling--.

PL: I didn't tell them how I was going to do it.

NP: And they didn't ask?

PL: No. They were so glad! [Laughing] All I did is move my one machine over, but I didn't--. That's all. They used to wonder, "When was I going to start knocking it down?" Then we knocked it down. It was no secret or anything. It was in one way. Imperial Oil would have hung us all, [laughs] you know, because the tanks are all there. But it didn't bother them. It didn't even shift the ground there.

NP: Were you also responsible for taking the rubble away?

PL: Oh, no. There was a huge--. See where that is?

NP: Yes.

PL: Just ahead there was a huge hole. That was our idea to put it in that hole with a big dozer. Just run it down and put a foot of sand or gravel they had. We had one of the local guys haul in gravel and just push it.

NP: So, the elevator's still there, essentially, just a bunch of rubble?

PL: Yeah. That's it, yeah.

NP: Ah! Well, I'm glad to hear that. It's sort of like it's in its own little graveyard!

PL: Yeah, it's a graveyard, but with no stone. [Laughing]

NP: Wouldn't want to plant a garden on it, though!

PL: I don't think it would make--. No. [Laughing] I wouldn't do that! No, that's exactly--. Nothing was hauled off the site.

NP: Were you around then, or were people talking to you, about what to take out of here? Because I know they took the old steam engine out of here.

PL: Oh, no. That's early. I think that was even before I had the contract. But the guys from the power, would've been the--. What power is it in Winnipeg? Not Winnipeg, in Thunder Bay. Ontario Hydro.

NP: Right.

PL: This guy, I remember him from the bar, but we didn't talk anything about anything. But he lives just over—if he's still around—he lived just over there in Westfort.

NP: What did he--? He was responsible for taking it out?

PL: No, he took that, and they've got it in a museum somewhere. That was a fine unit, you know. It ran a whole elevator with ropes on wheels. Unbelievable! Him and a bunch of voluntary guys, they took it out in about a day and a half. So, where it is I don't know. I never paid much attention. I would imagine we would have dragged it out of there. We wouldn't have blown it up, that's for sure. But they did. They took it out. I don't know where they put it.

NP: It's in storage somewhere on Arthur Street is what I understand because there's no place to display it.

PL: Oh, okay! That's all I'm telling you because I don't know any--. I wondered where they did put it! I just wondered, but I didn't--. But it shouldn't have been destroyed, so it's on Arthur Street. I'm very pleased.

NP: Anything else that you would like to say about that job?

PL: I don't know.

NP: Did you ever blow up any other elevators?

PL [Laughs] No, I never have. Just a few bridges and a few things, I guess.

NP: And Mr. Loizeaux?

PL: Eh?

NP: And Mr. Loizeaux, did he--?

PL: Loizeaux? His son, Controlled Demolitions, is the largest in the world today. His son really took to it. When I knew Jack, his son was at the University of Tennessee, and they really made a study of it. But it's a family company. His wife does it too apparently. I never met the son. I met Jack's brother. I met him, but--.

[1:05:47]

NP: So, tell me—because we see these pictures here—so tell me how that day unfolded for you, like on a personal basis. When did you get up and how did the day end?

PL: Well, we were in a bar over at the hotel, and I think it was about 6:30 Walter Cronkite had it on the--. I had a tape on it, you know, the thing? They were showing the whole thing. Well, this is what Jack was after. You could see his point of view. Not an insurance company in the world would turn him down now! [Laughs] We've always laughed about it.

NP: So, did you get up early in the morning? Was it exciting when you got up? Were you apprehensive? What--?

PL: No. I say, well, we worked at it so long, quietly, that it was kind of, yeah, quite normal.

NP: What time of day did you actually--?

PL: When we set that? I think we let her go around 10:30, 11:00. 10:30 maybe. It wasn't any big deal to us, to Jack. We knew where it was going to go.

NP: So, two minutes it was all over, or is that too long?

PL: That's too long. [Laughs] It was all over in a minute. I mean, from the first bang, it was about a minute. Once it started moving it just came down like. But nothing went up near 20 degree, you know? The helicopter was filming.

NP: Was that your last involvement with an elevator then?

PL: I'm just wondering. Yeah, I don't think I had--. No. I don't think--. I had involvement with an elevator over in Port Arthur because they had scales, outside scales. When I was extending the breakwater, you see, I had to weigh the stone from where I'm blasting. Right there is the lake and there's the--. I asked them, "Could I use those scales?" And they said, "Sure!" They didn't even charge or nothing.

NP: So, you brought your trucks in where the scales are?

PL: Yeah, right. Yeah, and no problem. I expected to pay, but I'm going to ask them. I said, "Send me a bill."

NP: Now, breakwaters has something to do with the grain industry too.

PL: Who?

NP: Breakwaters. Without the breakwaters it would be pretty hard to conduct good shipping or loading at the lakefront elevators. So, what was your involvement with the breakwater? What extension were you doing? Or was it repair?

PL: Well, it was minor actually. We had the, as you can see, we had the big marine equipment. Did I show you this?

[1:10:06]

NP: Yes, you did. Yeah.

PL: But anyway, that was minor. I've been retired for over 20 years, you know.

NP: Mmhmm. You've got a great memory for somebody who's been retired that long!

PL: Well, yeah, that's what scared me when you said because I couldn't--. I even had to ask my wife, "When did I come here?"
[Laughing]

NP: You did your homework! [Laughing]

PL: I got it right here! Little paper. Bill Peach, Harry Olsen, June. [Laughs] Yeah.

NP: Well.

PL: 1957 to 1960, C.D. Howe.

NP: Now, just to tell you a little bit about what we're doing and also to ask you about what you might have. We're hoping to set up a grain elevator museum in town, and we currently have a request into the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board to have an elevator on the Kam River—Fort William Elevator F. It's called Western 10 now, but it's still operating. It has a rope-drive or had a rope drive.

PL: Did it?

NP: Yeah, he kept the--.

PL: I've seen it, but I never thought--.

NP: Yeah, he's taken it out and replaced it with electricity, but--.

PL: But it did have it?

NP: But he did that, and he kept the ropes. All of the pulleys and things are still in the elevator. So, we've got that in the works, and we're hoping that we could use that as a centre to show all the history, including the history of the elevators. I have a little chart that I keep called "Elevators Up and Down", so the building of them and then, of course, this is a really important piece, the--.

PL: Knocking them down! [Laughing]

NP: Knocking them down. I mean, you see the pictures of the crews, you know. Hundreds of people building them up, and two guys take one down? [Laughs] You know, it's sad in its way.

PL: Yeah.

NP: But anyway, that's what we're hoping to do. We hope we'll hear within the next few months whether we're successful. But regardless of that, we've got this project, and we now have about 175 people that we've interviewed. Syd Halter being one that you mentioned.

PL: Did you get him?

NP: Yes, we did!

PL: But Syd died.

NP: Yes, just before. He died about a year after we interviewed him. Yeah. Mr. Parrish, who told us about how solid your elevator was! [Laughs] We also have starting an archive of various photographs. So, do you think you can track down your video that you have of the Cronkite piece?

PL: It was like a Hollywood tape.

NP: Yeah, do you think you've got it somewhere?

PL: No, I gave to my brother within a couple of months. He wanted it, and he went to Ottawa. But that film, apparently, the film if you don't keep it in the proper place, the film deteriorates because it's--.

NP: Ah. So, it may not be around? No copy anymore?

PL: Oh, it would never--.

NP: Oh, what a shame.

PL: Because he probably would be carrying it in his--. He just wanted to show somebody. He had a group and he wanted to show. He said he would send it back, but I didn't think of it because I didn't know that if you don't keep it in the proper--.

NP: Humidity and all of those things.

PL: Yeah, humidity. And I didn't care about the damn thing.

NP: So, is he still around, your brother?

PL: Yeah, yeah, he's still around. But he wouldn't know what the hell it is. [Laughs]

NP: What you were talking about?

PL: [Laughs] Oh, yes. He might.

NP: Well, could you ask him? Just on the off chance that he didn't toss it away and it might be okay?

PL: I could phone him, yeah.

NP: Sure, just ask, you know.

PL: I'll phone him and ask, but he'll laugh.

NP: Yeah! [Laughing]

PL: I know, but he wouldn't look after it. He wouldn't have a clue. He's just a good old machine operator. [Laughs]

[1:15:01]

NP: Yeah. So, these are the only two photos you have of the--? And that.

PL: I didn't even know we had this, but June had taken it.

NP: Okay, well this is from the *Times Journal* collection, so I think they--.

PL: If that, yeah--. I was going to say to you, these came from--.

NP: *Times Journal*.

PL: Yeah, and you could--. Yeah, *Times Journal* could get them for you.

NP: Yeah. I think there are still some. Now, if I can't track them down, I might ask you if we could borrow them to scan them.

PL: If they--.

NP: But I'd rather not take them.

PL: But if you can't, yes.

NP: But I will let you know.

PL: You can scan them and take it from there. Yeah.

NP: Return them to you. Yeah. Monika any questions you have to ask?

MM: Nope!

NP: And this article I already have a copy of it.

PL: Oh, well, you have it then? Sure!

NP: I do, I do. Yeah. So, we'll keep your little collection here. Anything you'd like to add?

PL: Well, I hope you get your museum.

NP: I do too! You'll be in our invitees list to come and take a look at it. Then we might even have a place to put the steam engine.

PL: You'd have to phone Hydro, would you?

NP: I'd have to phone the gentleman. I can't remember his name, but I've got it in my files.

PL: You've got it? Yeah. But somebody, they wouldn't give that away you know.

NP: No. They're looking for a place to put it on display.

PL: Yeah, yeah.

NP: I know they were trying to get the Museum to do it, but the Museum didn't have a space big enough.

PL: Yeah, you've got to have a fair-sized space.

MM: Who's they, Nancy?

NP: About the steam engine?

MM: Yeah, you said they were looking for a place. Who?

NP: Well, he described it as a volunteer group that were interested in steam engines. They got a grant of \$12,000 or something to go with it.

PL: Yeah, they got money from somebody. But they would have probably, each guy would have picked up a few bucks.

NP: I'm not certain. Like they may have just left it--. Because they were talking about having it used for putting the display together, so.

PL: Well, they must have it because if they've got it at a warehouse somewhere, they've got to be paying somebody for it.

NP: That's right.

PL: Nobody would give it, you know?

NP: Unless somebody's volunteering the space too. Could be in somebody's barn for all we know.

PL: Yeah, right.

NP: I didn't follow up because there wasn't much I could do about it until we had a spot.

PL: No.

NP: Anyway, this is a great part of the history, and I really appreciate your agreeing to being interviewed. We'll formally end the interview, and there we go. Stop.

End of interview.