Narrator: Richard Maundrell (RM)

Company Affiliations: United Grain Growers Elevator A

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Summary: Professor of philosophy Richard Maundrell describes his three summers as a university student working at United Grain Growers Elevator A. He details the kind of work he performed in the car shed, the cleaner deck, and the spout floor, as well as a year-long injury he received from an accident with a broken cable. Maundrell discusses the makeup and attitude of elevator workers compared to other industry workers, but also the unwritten codes of brotherhood these union-men all had in common. Other topics discussed include workplace alcohol and drug abuse, grain blending and pellet making, government workers in the elevators, elevator tours, reasons for the industry's downturn, the end of the industry's golden era, dust control, and bin diving.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative
OM: We're going to start. EE: Well, let's start by my asking you to give us your name and describe how you came to work in the grain industry. RM: Richard Maundrell. My experience was entirely as a summer student, years '79, '80, and '82. I suppose I was successful in getting a job in the elevators because a friend of mine was working as a millwright at United Grain Growers [UGG] Elevator A. As was a custom at the time, a word to the foreman was usually enough for people to get an inside track on a position. So basically, it was who I knew not what I knew that got me in there originally. Excellent employment for a summer student at that time.

EE: So you worked there over the three summers almost in succession, with ’81 as a break in the--?

RM: ‘81 was a break because I was injured at the time.

EE: Not in the elevators?

RM: Yes, at the elevators at the end of summer in ’81, sorry ’80, just before Labour Day weekend. And that took me out for a year.

EE: Really?

RM: Then when I recuperated from that, I went back for the last year in ’82.

EE: Well, those comments already open several different possibilities, one of which would be the nature of the workforce. Whether this pattern of who you knew determining or influencing who worked there. Was there any kind of a homogeneity to the workforce?

RM: Well, I’m going to use the word “men” in reference to people who worked there because there were no female employees at all–not on the elevator side. The government, the grain inspection side, had female employees at the time. Thinking back, we were a pretty homogenous bunch.

EE: In what, within the male gender?

RM: Well, there weren’t many--. Certainly, all male, not many brown faces in the group that I recall.

EE: Caucasian. Any particular European background, I’m guessing, as characteristic?

RM: Depending on the generations. The long-term employees there at the time, my impression was, were predominantly immigrants. I’m thinking Eastern Europe—Poland, Ukraine—still with their accents, and so very recognizable as having come from that area. Then with the different age groups you can see the transition so that many of the younger full-time employees when I was there were actually quite highly educated, but they were attracted to the elevators because wages and benefits were very good. And the time I was there, early ‘80s, there was a rather nasty recession in North America.

EE: There was indeed through ’81/’82.

RM: Local conditions were not good. A lot of men had lost their jobs in the forest industry, and so they were refugees looking for work in what at that time was a booming grain trade. I think that you would know this probably because my impression was that ’80 and ’82 were record years for shipping grain.

EE: And maybe for another year or two. When I ran in the summer of 1984 just two years later, Frank Mazur, the president of the grain handlers, the Lodge-650, was it, of the BRAC—the Brotherhood of Railway, Airline et cetera, et cetera, Clerks —was one of my supporters. In fact, moved my nomination at the nomination meeting, and of course we did some photo ops together. But he spoke of 1,800 grain handlers along the waterfront.

RM: That sounds right. I think every elevator was fully operational during shipping season, meaning three shifts running pretty much at capacity. I don’t think they could’ve shipped any more if they had to.

EE: So it really was a good time to be there in terms of observations–young and bright student working for the summertime.

RM: It was, well, the glory days, I suppose.

EE: Yes. Yes, they really were.

RM: My understanding is that it did come to an end shortly after that.

EE: We won’t get into the particulars. There can be debate about why that happened, but certainly it declined through the middle ‘80s. One has--. I’ve sometimes thought a century of the grain trade as really important from 1883 when the first CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] trains came through from the Prairies through to, let’s say, 1983 or so. It’s a neat 100 years in which the grain trade was really important. It still is a factor, I’m certainly not going to deny that, but there’s far less of it now than there was in those days.

[0:05:13]

RM: There was a, certainly, there was a sense at the time that this was the place to be, the industry to be in, because people were getting the grim economic news daily of what was happening elsewhere in the economy, and things have never been better in the grain trade. A lot of young men had come in there with university degrees—not just arts degrees, not just unemployable—but

people with business degrees and so on who saw this as their best option because the wages and benefits were good, and it looked like it was going to be a very secure job.

EE: So it was an interesting place to work in the summertime, I take it, with all the new students from various backgrounds?

RM: Yes.

EE: And you're suggesting that the permanent workforce also included people with university degrees then?

RM: Yes, that's, I suppose, what struck me at the time was whereas the older employees tended to be men with limited education—I mean immigrants, and this was perhaps their only opportunity when they came here—to men who you would think would have other options, but who had sort of made the decision that this was the best place to be.

EE: Yes.

RM: And often, I mean, young men with families and mortgages. So earning a certain amount of money was a necessity.

EE: Yes. And may be enough to acquire some of the toys as well.

RM: The Thunder Bay lifestyle, you've got it. The truck, the boat, the camp, and sure.

EE: The ATV.

RM: That was accessible with a job at the elevators.

EE: So the grain elevators had it over the paper mills just at that point as well you're suggesting.

RM: Certainly, at that time, yeah. But there's also--. I remember a man who had been a real estate agent for many years. He was probably 40 or thereabouts, and he couldn't be happier to be at the elevators because he had never made this much money in the real estate business. So there was probably a few like that. Not just refugees from other industries that were laying off, but people just saw it as a better opportunity. I thought that was sad given what had happened shortly thereafter because I imagine many of those people lost their jobs a couple years after.

EE: Yes. One of the saddest experiences I remember from the 1988 campaign was knocking at a door on North High Street–some experiences you never forget. The chap coming to the door, and he was a grain handler–I think he might have been of Italian origin—lost his job and it looked pretty clear, you know, he didn't want to talk very long because the candidate or MP out canvassing doesn't have much to offer at the time. I felt his pain keenly and wondered about--. He had a lovely home. It had probably been built up thanks to the earnings at the elevators. What was the future going to hold for him? I don't know. I don't suppose I'd recognize him if I ran into him now. Anyway.

RM: There's a certain smugness too, as I recall, because the thinking was, the logic was the world has to eat no matter what, and we've got the grain. We've got a staple, which turned out to be untrue because--. And you would know better than I. My impression was they were record shipping years because they were still selling a lot of grain to the Soviet Union.

EE: Yes, and around the Atlantic market.

RM: And that market disappeared.

EE: And then the Pacific market, which had been important at some times in the past—early '60s, Elvin Hamilton's success in selling to China and so on—but that Pacific Rim market took over.

RM: Which meant the grain went to the West Coast.

EE: And the Western Grain Transportation Act lived up to its name. [Laughing]

RM: Right.

EE: In a way that I don't think the legislators had in mind when they initially labelled the act that came out of the Trudeau Government in the early '80s. You might put this into the context. I might recognize the fact that you're now a professor of philosophy at Lakehead University about 22 years after--. I'm sorry, what am I saying? 27 years after your last period there.

RM: Yeah, that sounds close.

EE: Get the arithmetic right. You were an undergraduate and the time or were you in graduate studies already?

RM: I was an undergraduate. Yeah. So the last summer I worked, that was the summer before I went to graduate school. So that was my last, thankfully, my last experience with hardhats and work boots and that kind of whole lifestyle.

EE: When you first began working there 1979, 30 years ago, did you in fact think of conceivably continuing in the elevators? Or did you have academic aspirations already at that point?

RM: It crossed my mind. It really did.

EE: Decision to be made.

RM: It did cross. And a lot of people who had gone in originally for summer work ended up staying on full time, because what you have to appreciate is it wasn't just a good hourly. The last year I worked, I think, if I recall correctly, it was $13 an hour, which at the time was excellent pay for a summer student.

[0:10:26]

EE: Yes, indeed.

RM: But there was also the overtime. And the overtime was unbelievable. I think between, say, mid-June and the end of August, I didn't have a single day off, which was great because Sundays and statutory holidays, we got the--. I can't remember what the multiple was.

EE: Well, you'd be literally, you were working seven-day weeks?

RM: Seven-day weeks.

EE: And with Saturday and Sunday at, what, time and a half, double? Time and a half?

RM: Yeah, yeah. So you can imagine. I mean, incredible pay. It was many years before I had a paycheck that had the same gross number on it.

EE: [Laugh] You go back to classes in September a comparatively rich person.

RM: Absolutely, and I was able to finish my PhD debt-free, which I would think is much more difficult to do now. And it was, I mean, there were students there, like, going to dental college and so on, and a summer under those conditions would pay for everything—your tuition, books. 30 years later, $13 an hour is still a good wage for a student.

EE: Sure. It's still, what, roughly double the minimum wage, so.

RM: Right.

EE: Yeah. It's certainly far from something you would scoff at.

RM: So terrific opportunity at the time. And it did cross my mind that you could do worse than stay here because it was hard not to fall into the logic of, "The world has to eat, and we've got a secure job."

EE: But, of course, thinking of where you've gone, you could also do better.

RM: Right.

EE: Not necessarily in the economic terms.

RM: Certainly not ideal working conditions in terms of personal fulfillment and satisfaction. [Laughs]

EE: Did the injury and the end of the summer of 1980 impact your decision making at all? Could I ask what happened to you now?

RM: Oh, sure. I don't know how familiar you are with the operation, but I was working in the car shed at the time where the dumping operation is. And at UGG A, they would move the cars around with a cable system. So there was a big hook, a seven-eighths diameter cable, which they hook onto a boxcar and pull it through, and of course, they'd pull it out of the car shed, and it would run down a ramp. My job was to ride the cars down the ramp and put the brake on before it slammed into the other empty cars at the end of the track. A certain brake-man type job. And one morning--. Again, this is just before the Labour Day weekend. I was looking forward to finishing for the summer, having registration week, with free time before school started.

EE: And lots of money.

RM: [Laughing] Tonnes of money! And everything was looking great. And snap. I was walking up to get on the car, heard this snap behind me, and the cable hit my left leg, knocked me off my feet. Realized immediately that the leg was badly broken, and it was. It was a compound fracture, which developed complications later on. They initially put a plate, set it, and released me from the hospital. Things were going fairly well, but then infections set in, osteomyelitis, back for more surgery. So I wasn't out of a cast until late in the winter the following year, about March or so.

EE: Most of the academic year then?

RM: I lost my academic year. Then there was--. It took a few months to get the leg going again, so really it took one complete calendar year out of my life by the time it was off.

EE: Right. I'm a bit of a connoisseur of leg injuries. [Laughs] My knee twice—1972 and this past May as I think I may have mentioned—that's why the letter went to you in May and here we are in October doing this interview.

RM: I see.

EE: So curious, you broke the--. **[*… audio skips*]** Compound fracture I'm not familiar with, but I get the picture.

RM: Yeah.

EE: Was this covered then by worker's comp?

RM: It was. Yeah.

EE: In a reasonably satisfactory way?

RM: Yeah, my experience with the Compensation Board wasn't bad. Thankfully.

EE: Because you were on whatever. What's the payment called? You were on that through the academic year because you couldn't go to classes at all.

RM: I started school on my crutches, but after being re-admitted and surgery and so on, I just got so tired that I--.

EE: Had to give it up.

RM: Discretion being the better point of valour on that one. It wouldn't have been possible for me to finish that year. So I just withdrew, and then I got the compensation until the end of the following summer.

[0:15:15]

EE: Right. Then it was back to it in 1982.

RM: The last summer in '82.

EE: The last summer.

RM: Yeah.

EE: Well, you've told us who you worked for, UGG A. Any comments on the company?

RM: Anything in particular, nothing sort of springs to mind. I didn't know much about the entity that was UGG at the time, nor did I ever really understand—nor to this day do I understand—how the grain business works. [Laughing]

EE: Right. Well, we won't have a seminar in it here and now. [Laughs]

RM: I mean I lived in a house looking over Lake Superior, and I would see the boats. And maybe you know this, when you see a saltie at anchor, you think, "Okay." Salties always have to wait a couple days before they can load, whereas the lakers just come right into the slip, get loaded up, and they're on their way. Do you know why that is?

EE: No, I don't think I have an immediate answer to that.

RM: Never been explained to me.

EE: We may have to get back to Captain Mann or Bill Hryb who's in the business now.

RM: Somebody suggested that the--.

EE: You suggested a question for us to keep in mind as we pursue this.

RM: Well, I was just curious, that's it.

EE: Probably have a few others. **[*… audio skips*]**

RM: Lengths of the grain industry is something I do not understand.

EE: Right. In that kind of detail. Well, this is--.

RM: And of course, I wasn't required to understand.

EE: No, you weren't, of course not. But this suggests something of the kind of work that we might work towards. You know, kind of a primer on the grain trade.

RM: Well, somebody suggested that the grain company is waiting for the cheque to clear at the bank before they load up. That doesn't sound right. Although, who knows.

EE: Well, if it's bound for say a European market or whatever, there may well be. We might go back and listen to Captain Mann's interview. It may explain--.

RM: But you'd think in the shipping industry time is money, and having a ship anchored for a couple days is a waste of capital.

EE: It could be that the crew of the saltie is enjoying the delights of Thunder Bay for a day or two.

RM: That's possible too.

EE: All the way up to the captain.

RM: But it's just something I didn't understand at the time, and it still occurs. When I look out the window, I see one sitting at anchor and think it's wasting time, presumably money, and I never did understand. But anyway. It's not important.

EE: Right. The fact that the--. And I'm guessing that they're working on contract for the Canadian Wheat Board [CWB] in a sense ultimately, under the aegis of the--. Or maybe it's the other way around. They're maybe working for a grain company which they still own the grain, but certainly under the aegis of the Canadian Wheat Board, which has a keen sense of keeping the grain moving. So it may simply be that lakers for those reasons and the additional that they want to keep it moving get that kind of precedence. I just don't know. We're going to try to interview someone who worked for the Grain Transportation Agency 20-odd years ago, and he probably would have an answer to that question too in terms of--. I mean, their first concern was rail, but they probably were keenly aware of the ships as well because that's this intermodal of the elevators. Of course, in between these terminal elevators doing the important job of transferring but also some other functions. The questionnaire doesn't actually include anything about the union explicitly, but since I've asked you about the company--. **[… *audio skips*]** Lodge 650 for those summers.

RM: Yeah, I was.

EE: Did the union contact you in any real way as a student working for the summer?

RM: Not really because, of course, when you're first hired, a certain number of days--.

EE: Are required.

RM: Go by before you're eligible. So I don't think I ever was actually a member.

EE: Well, that may have been set up by a mutual agreement or whatever that the students didn't become members. That's possible. They negotiated a good rate for them and so on. They got the benefits. I guess you got full benefits as well?

RM: Yeah. I believe so. And of course, it helped the company because it enabled full-time employees to take summer vacation. And there was also the third shift at the peak of the sort of summer shipping season. So I guess it worked well for the company as well as for us. It was my first experience in a unionized workplace because before working at the elevators, I spent two summers working for a construction company, Armbro Construction out of Brampton. And we were doing sewer and water construction, which I--. **[… *audio skips*]** Because I thought construction was a wonderful life and--.

EE: See something actually appearing as a result of your labour.

RM: At the end of the day, you've accomplished something. There's a certain cheerfulness that goes along with it rather than being in a production process where you have a monotonous lifestyle. It's the same every day. It has been for decades.

[0:20:10]

EE: Aside from technological change, which could throw you out of a job conceivable. [Laughs]

RM: But yes, the union, working in--. That was an eye opener in many ways, being in a setting like that.

EE: You weren't faced with situations that called for the union steward to come in to help you out with anything? Worker's comp, Compensation Board, you--.

RM: No. No, I never had any involvement with the union as such.

EE: It was probably the human resources office or whatever at the company.

RM: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: Were injuries common there from your observation?

RM: Mine was the worst. The whole time I was there, mine was the worst.

EE: Yeah. Because a cable broke?

RM: Yeah.

EE: Tore and, what's the word, just sort of--. Yes, that's right.

RM: Shoots like a bullet in the opposite direction.

EE: And you just happened to be where the cable came through.

RM: Wrong place at the wrong time, and very lucky not to have lost my leg. I think that it knocked me up in the air, the cable. My body would not have stopped the cable.

EE: No. No, I'm sure.

RM: It would have taken off whatever part it hit. So I always and still consider myself very fortunate that I got through that intact.

EE: Yeah. Right. Ok. Well, let's--.

RM: It was horrendous really. [Laughs]

EE: Pardon me?

RM: It was horrendous really.

EE: Yeah. Well, it's a terrible experience when you're looking at all the particulars of day by day through '80/'81.

RM: Yeah.

EE: It would be pretty bad. Did you always do the same work you were describing? Being the sort of brakeman on these cars towards the end of the summer of 1980.

RM: Yeah.

EE: Did you do other work as well in the elevators?

RM: Yes.

EE: Were you in fact moved around as a fill in?

RM: Yeah, right. Yeah. So, I mean, the first step is "shit gang"—labourer, cleaning, sweeping—always plenty of that. And the first summer, I think that's all I did. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** Course that's the whole Sisyphean task of sweeping a floor which is, by the time you get to one end, is filled in again. Endlessly. But also, I worked--. I spent a lot of time working the cleaner deck, the spout floor, and the car shed. Those are the three other things that I did.

EE: And the elevators were involved in cleaning the grain at that time? As the cleaner floor, the--.

RM: Cleaner, yeah.

EE: Getting the screenings out of it and whatever it was.

RM: Right. That was one of the preferred jobs.

EE: Was it actually?

RM: Especially at that time because they had quite a number of people working on the floor. So each person was responsible for a sort of battery of four machines. Your only real responsibility for the most part was making sure the grain is still coming through. So when the bin is empty, you call upstairs for another bin to open, and make sure that there are no blockages. The grain comes out of the cars, it's got tin cans and pop bottles and dead skunks and so on, and sometimes it'll clog up. Yeah, so it wasn't a job that required a lot of effort either physically or intellectually.

EE: Now, I was thinking of weed seeds in the grain, but you just suggested larger things coming out of the--.

RM: All kinds of things.

EE: So what sort? You mentioned three different kinds. [Laughing] What else came down?

RM: Uh. You name it. I mean, chunks of wood or anything that's on the field, I guess, when the combines chop the--. [Laughs]

EE: Including the skunk. How many skunks did--?

RM: I remember one. It was pretty dried out, so it wasn't too bad.

EE: Had been desiccated by this time. Yeah. This is grain for the bakeries of Europe we're talking about, of course. I guess it's going to be baked—ground and baked.

RM: You know, working around food will probably put you off that for the rest of your life. But not in this case because it's in such a raw form. It hasn't been turned into flour yet.

EE: No. No, that's right. That would be much worse than if you were next to bag the flour.

RM: It wasn't disgusting in that way. **[… *audio skips*]**

EE: Didn't quite catch the next one after the cleaner floor.

RM: Oh, the spout floor, which is just below the scale floor. And so I don't know if you've seen a spout floor in an elevator.

EE: I probably--. I'm sure I have seen it because we've visited--. I've seen the Richardson Elevator there, every part.

RM: Oh, ok.

EE: This is where the grain is moving down, is it, towards the ships already?

RM: Comes out of the scales and can be directed a number of ways through the elevator, but the floor consists of it's just a flat concrete floor with what looked for all the world like garbage can lids with numbers on them. So you'd get a set from the scale floor, and you'd move--. The spout is on wheels, you move it, lock it in place, and call upstairs and tell them that it's ready to go. The only trick to this job is if they give you a set of five or six numbers, remembering those numbers and getting the spouts in the correct places. Because if you get things mixed up, then the wrong grain goes to the wrong place.

[0:25:08]

EE: Yeah. They're not painted on, the numbers?

RM: Well, the numbers are painted on the lids, but if they give--. **[… *audio skips*]** Call. They just sort of fire them at you. And if you've been doing it for a while, it's not a problem, but your first few weeks on the job are pretty stressful in that respect.

EE: Have any misdirecting experiences in those days?

RM: Certainly have, yeah.

EE: You'd hear from down below when they saw what was coming through?

RM: Yes. Yes. Of course, you blame the most junior person around. It has to be your fault.

EE: Was there some humour about this or was it a grim experience to--?

RM: Pretty grim. Both an exercise in shifting blame or avoiding blame. I found that the attitude is rather childish in the sense that if you've done something wrong or made a mistake, you do what a child does: you hide. [Laughing] That's the first inclination. The second is to blame it on somebody else if you can. So. I don't know whether that kind of infantilization is sort of--. **[… *audio skips*]**

EE: We should get back to some of the people we've interviewed. This kind of issue didn't really come up when we were talking. I won't name any names now. [Laughing] What was the management structure like from your observation as regards control of the floor? There were foremen about, I suppose?

RM: The only contact, I mean the only sort of part of the management hierarchy that I had any involvement with, was the supervisor, who--.

EE: Of the whole operation?

RM: Or superintendent, I guess.

EE: Of the elevator.

RM: Right.

EE: Right.

RM: You wouldn't see very often in the elevator in the working place.

EE: No. I was thinking really working down. You know, the structure.

RM: And then there was a--.

EE: Because were you in work teams? No, I suppose not. You were a number of people doing similar--.

RM: Oh. Oh, I see. Ok.

EE: I was thinking of foremen and so on and so forth. Who were you hiding from, I guess, is what I'm partly thinking about? Or who was--?

RM: All right. So each shift, there's a foreman, but he wasn't officially a foreman. He wasn't a white hat as such, but it was his responsibility to run that area of the operation. But he wasn't a management employee. And rather strangely I thought, on midnight shift there was no white hat either. So the person in charge was the senior unionized employee onsite.

EE: Sort of the lead worker, lead hand, eh?

RM: And these people were usually the more motivated employees. But something I noticed—this is something interesting to me coming and working a unionized workplace for the first time—is of course their job as supervisor is to make sure everybody is doing their job. And the tenet of midnight shift is to get a nap if you can, which is basically dereliction of duty. But there's an unwritten code that--. **[..** ***audio skips*****]** And you would be sent back to do your job, but there was no question that you would ever be reported because that's the union man's code–code of honour. You're not going to--.

EE: Squeal on your brother.

RM: Yeah, yeah. I just found that interesting. It's just a kind of--.

EE: It's interesting that the Circadian rhythms—have I got the term right?—of the human body really expressing itself. It's damn difficult to work eight hours from midnight to 8:00 or whatever the time period was. Or of course, I think of comments at the Red Rock, the old Domtar Mill at Red Rock, when I plant gated there and fellows would be joking about getting a nap during the night.

RM: The other place I--.

EE: But they were working 12-hour shifts, so it would be even more tempting there.

RM: Well, I think the company's entitled to its eight hours of work whether it's midnight or not. But the other place I noticed this—this is interesting too—was when I was quite young, I hopped a freight train with a friend of mine. It was a big adventure and a look into a world which I'd never seen before. I wasn't sure about this visit because we climbed in one of the units, you know, big freight trains of five or six locomotives. The crew was in the front, right, and we're maybe second or third back.

EE: In a boxcar?

RM: No. On one of the spare units because there were five in a set. But only the first is--.

EE: A grain car? I'm thinking--. Oh, in the locomotive?

RM: In one of the locomotives.

EE: In one of the locomotives. Ok.

RM: But not the one where the crew was because they were in the front.

EE: Right. Yeah, they're in the front one, and you're enjoying the comforts of a back one.

RM: But they could see us. Well, I mean, aren't they concerned we're trespassing? No, they're not because they're good union men. They would never report someone hopping a freight to, say, the railway police. They may not like you being there, but there's an old code of the railway man that they're not going to snitch on you. They're not going to report you. I think that was the same kind of mentality, the same value system at work.

[0:30:37]

EE: Isn't that interesting. So--.

RM: And even at stops where an employee would come and check all the gauges, they'd go through all the units, and of course, they would find you. Nothing would be said. He'd just continue as if you weren't there.

EE: Really? You were invisible.

RM: It's the same thing, I think, at the elevator, which I found very interesting.

EE: This hopping was in southern Ontario, I suppose.

RM: No, it was Northwestern Ontario.

EE: Oh, I see. So you met, whatever the company was, you met some of the grain engine drivers and their colleagues on one of our trains moving grain through Northwestern Ontario.

RM: Right. Yeah. Again, something I knew nothing about before. It was a terrific little adventure for a weekend.

EE: How far did you ride?

RM: From Thunder Bay to Schreiber and then back again.

EE: Oh, yes.

RM: That's about one day's ride one way and then the other ride back again.

EE: And I suppose as far as these men were concerned, there was a railway police force, but it was distinct, probably a separate union for that matter.

RM: Right.

EE: And they weren't in the business of assisting them.

RM: Right.

EE: You weren't heavy enough to add to the cost of moving the train or anything of that sort. [Laughs]

RM: You don't have to worry about railway employees—either the train crews or the others—it's just the railway police that you have to watch for.

EE: Yes. Isn't that interesting.

RM: But you need somebody to show you the way. I mean, that's a whole world I knew nothing about. So you'd have to know what the rules are.

EE: And how to keep yourself safe, for that matter, getting on and off.

RM: How to get on and off and where to do that. And of course, you're going through an area like Thunder Bay, you have to get off before you get in the city because it's very heavily surveilled by--.

EE: Right. That's where the police are.

RM: Right. You wouldn't want to go through Thunder Bay.

EE: No.

RM: But you'd have to know that too or you're going to get caught.

EE: Yes. I wonder if these were codes that date as far back as the 1930s.

RM: That occurred to me too.

EE: Maybe even earlier, but. Yeah.

RM: Yeah, I thought the same thing. There seems to be an ancient code to this everybody recognizes and lives by.

EE: My father died in the spring of '80 so I can't ask him about this. He worked as far west as Alberta out of southern Manitoba. I got a sense that he might have travelled gratis for some of that, getting as far as northern Alberta and back and so on and so forth. It would be interesting to compare. I guess we probably can't find any old guys now who rode the rods back in those days.

OM: Tracey's father did. [Note: Glen Hanna interview. Tracey is Owen's wife.]

EE: Well, maybe we have another subject. Did we have a floor left of the places you worked in the elevator?

RM: No. Just the car shed.

EE: Oh, yes. Which is where the injury happened. Well, what kind of work did you do? We've pretty well gone through that. Please describe a typical--. Was there a typical day on the job or did they all sort of run together as typical days?

RM: Yeah, they were about as typical as--. Again, coming from construction I really didn't like it—punching in and then going through the same sequence of operations and just the monotony of it all. You're a cog in a machine. That was very much the feeling I had.

EE: And eight-hour day, you'd arrive, punch in, couple of hours work, coffee break. Were there breaks, coffee and lunch?

RM: Coffee breaks, yeah, and of course, you could go for a smoke break any time you wanted. I didn't smoke, so I didn't have that opportunity.

EE: No, but guys would, they'd step outside the elevator. Because you didn't really--.

RM: You can't smoke in the elevator.

EE: Yes.

RM: Yeah, so that's an opportunity to go for fresh air. If you consider a cigarette fresh air. Yeah.

EE: Yeah, they'd have to quite careful. By this time, of course, the dust control had come in to some extent through the 70s, wasn't it?

RM: Right.

EE: It was made safer to work in the elevators, but still in all, you wouldn't want a cigarette inside the place.

RM: Still a lot of dust. Yeah. Yeah.

EE: We had someone refer to the Port Arthur Shipbuilding, you get a "pass-out" before you passed out. This was of course with the mickey in the hip pocket. [Laughing] I gather that if there was a lot of smoking in the elevators, as there will have been there, there was also apparently an awful lot of drinking that went on.

RM: Yes, there was. Yeah.

[0:35:00]

EE: At Port Ship and at the elevators too?

RM: Yeah.

EE: And was it frowned upon? Or did management try to prevent it, or did people bring in bottles?

RM: Well, sure. The management frowned upon it, but it was done blatantly by--. To this extent where this guy working on the scale floor—it was an evening shift—and I guess one of our group would have gone in to punch in with a big paper bag under his arm full of beer, and came up to the scale floor, took his six pack out and said, "Would you like one?" It was that blatant.

EE: He wasn't at all concerned about someone seeing it and reporting it or whatever?

RM: Not at all. Not at all. It was done. I found that shocking, actually.

EE: I imagine one would at first.

RM: And there was an incident at the time where a floorman had caught someone with a bottle, and there had been actions taken, and the grievance was filed, and the defense was the employee claimed that he had found an empty bottle, was disposing of the glass—is dangerous in an elevator. He won his case and was reinstated. So the message there was even if you were caught red handed by a foreman--.

EE: It should be with an empty bottle?

RM: You better drink quickly. [Laughing] yeah, so lots of alcohol abuse and drug abuse at the time.

EE: Drugs as well?

RM: Yeah.

EE: And you weren't conscious of attempts to police this or limit it or prevent it conceivably because of course substance abuse is--.

RM: I don't even see how they could even begin to prevent that.

EE: It was that bad, eh?

RM: Yeah.

EE: Did you have experience with workplace safety to any extent at all then? When you're given instructions very quickly on how to route the grain for example, that doesn't suggest concern about being sure that you were properly instructed. Was there concern in other areas to make sure that your life would be safe?

RM: At that time, they seemed to have a pretty cavalier attitude about that so that any instruction about how to do the job and safety procedures was left to your fellow employees who may or may not go to the trouble of pointing these things out. Of course, it puts someone that goes in as a summer student in a difficult position because you probably will be moved from one place to another. And within a few days you understand how it works and what the hazards are, but you certainly don't the first couple of shifts on the job. So it was something I thought was lacking at the time. But of course, my experience was coloured by my accident, and so.

EE: Yes, that would certainly give point to the question. Whereas someone who managed to get through several summers of employment without any problem would not think all that much about it.

RM: In many ways, the hazards are obvious. You want to stay out of the way of freight cars. Bad things are going to happen if you fall off the top of the--. [Laughs] That sort of thing.

EE: Well, when you describe the accident in the car shed, I envisage something different immediately in terms of moving cars and all the rest of it rather than a broken cable, but yeah. Well, we won't pursue the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board [WSIB] development and so on, which is after this period. I don't know much about that either for that matter. Eight hours, check in, get coffee, lunch, and so on? Do as much work as is called for. And it is, of course, a process industry to some extent.

RM: Right.

EE: Grain on the move or grain being cleaned and so on and so forth. Someone else is really driving or they're just the whole. How many men roughly would you say worked in the elevator at any one time? Did you get a sense of that at all?

RM: I'm just guessing about 150, and that's just a rough guess.

EE: And you didn't gather in a lunchroom for your meals, I--.

RM: There was a lunchroom, but they are also different groups. So that the millwrights had their own little area and the electricians, and so the only people who shared the lunchroom area were, I guess, the sort of production workers as you would describe them.

EE: Yeah. Process people. Well, we get to questions that you may already have been answering. What would you like people to know about the work you did and the places you worked? We've actually encapsulated some elements of the experience quite nicely already.

RM: Yeah. I think so. I mean, I saw it and still see it as a terrific opportunity. It's sad that that sort of thing has disappeared for students. They don't have that opportunity. On the other hand, there was a sinister side to it as well, which I experienced to a certain extent. The sort of alcohol drug abuse thing was obviously a problem at the time, and the inability of management to put a lid on it. I mean during the time I was there, actually, one of the employees at my elevator murdered another one because he had loaned the other guy $1,500 for a drug deal and something happened, the money got lost, and he ended up shooting him.

[0:40:41]

EE: Not at the elevator?

RM: Not at the elevator, no.

EE: But they were both employees of that elevator?

RM: Both employees, yeah.

EE: Did that ramify into the workplace at all? The crime occurred elsewhere, and the alleged murderer was caught, I suppose? Tried and so on and so forth. Did it affect the place at all? Something to talk about for a day or two.

RM: No. it certainly got a lot of comments, but I don't think it had any consequences for the workplace.

EE: And these two were permanent employees, I suppose, not students?

RM: Yes.

EE: Whether the--. I guess the elevators probably weren't places where people who wanted to abuse substances went to work because we've obviously alluded to another place where that sort of thing happens.

RM: Well, it's funny. I mean, you think of the waterfront and the sort of jobs on the waterfront--.

EE: Longshoremen and all the rest of it.

RM: As attracting a rougher kind of person. I think that's always been the case. But of course, what I was seeing as well was a transition there too as there were people who would normally serve as middle class and had other options with degrees in business administration were voluntarily choosing that life. So there was, I guess, a cultural change. Now, the other thing that—I heard about this later—was that the elevators became much more efficient in their operations, maybe having something to do with the decline in the trade so that the--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** 1982 changed radically because they just reduced the number of employees working one shift. So instead of one person for every four machines, you might have two people for the whole floor, which would have, what, 24 machines in total. Evidently doable, but it meant that those two people would be busy all the time. Rather than the sort of standard life of taking a tour, checking your machines, and going back to the library and reading the newspaper or something or chatting with the other employees, which took a lot of your time. [Laughing]

EE: Yeah. This--.

RM: And again, it makes sense. It's just rationalizing the process, but there were many more employees it seemed to me than the operation actually needed.

EE: Yeah, this leaves me brooding over how to ask a question about that because it suggests that the United Grain Growers, who had acquired this facility or conceivably built it—I don't know which it was—and for some time of how much, I guess, the railway term would be "featherbedding" there was in the place in terms of its having a large workforce, larger than it would have to be if

one really wanted to--. When these changes took place, did you have a sense that efficiency experts were brought in to tell them how few people could actually do the job? Or did they just--?

RM: Don't know. And of course, I was out of it by then.

EE: Yes, yes. Quite.

RM: But I'll tell you, another area which—I mean this is actually funny—is that when I was working there, I think most of the grain was still being shipped in boxcars not the tanker cars. And--.

EE: Yeah, they were building the tanker cars in the 70s, but you're probably right. There were still a lot of boxcars being used.

RM: Of course, emptying a boxcar means clamping it in these big—what do you call them—big cradles.

EE: Yeah, you had the big shaker device.

RM: And tilting it back and forth until it's empty. And the amount of energy and time that goes into that as well as labour because you'd have one guy operating the machine--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** Maintains so that a tanker car is much more efficient. Just roll it in and one guy opens the slats and waits until it's empty.

EE: Right. Yes. Did you ever do this work, emptying boxcars?

RM: Yes. That's more car shed work. And also emptying the tanker cars.

EE: Yeah, so you saw the contrast very--. Experienced it quite keenly.

RM: But again, it just struck me, "Why don't they have a lot more tanker cars and do away with this old--?" It seemed a very antiquated system.

[0:45:03]

EE: Because there was a time when a man or two would actually go inside the boxcar to move the grain. Did you get--?

RM: Oh, that! No, no. Now I know what you're talking about.

EE: By the time you were working with these tilting devices, that wasn't necessary.

RM: UGG A was a very advanced elevator because it did have those cradle devices, whereas some of the older elevators or smaller elevators, you'd have to have guys going in and actually physically emptying them.

EE: Yes. And with boards, cables, and all the rest of it, it strikes me as potentially quite dangerous too.

RM: I'm sure it would--. **[… *audio skips*]** Whole industry seemed to be caught in a time warp to me.

EE: Right. So there are--. Well, maybe we'll just hold this off for the moment here being faithful to the basic questionnaire because you do have some changes to talk about actually. You're suggesting this, but--.

RM: I very much have the impression that I was there at the end of an era, that it was glory days, that it was the best time to be there. It was so good that it attracted people that I think would be caught in a bit of a trap shortly thereafter. But then things were about to change permanently.

EE: Right, yeah. What might interest or surprise people most about the work you did? That's another one of these obviously leading questions, [Laughing]

RM: Um. Well, I think we've covered a few of them already.

EE: I think so.

RM: One was the great revelation--. Again, like I said before, I never really understood how the system worked. But it struck me as shocking that the way we were working, essentially, was to take the--. **[… *audio skips*]** Out.

EE: Please do expand on that alteration. [Laughing]

RM: Because--.

EE: Mixing with junk I want to know about.

RM: Well, the government, of course, sets certain standards for the quality of grain being shipped and the amount of detritus in it. And the cleaning process was much more efficient than government standards allowed. So they would very carefully clean the grain. Now it could just as well have been shipped at that point, but of course, you make more money if you mix it with some of the garbage that you've taken out of it to just right ratio.

EE: Say a little more.

RM: So part of--. [Laughing] So part of the work at the elevator, it means running the tailings into the grain.

EE: Or the screenings, I would call--.

RM: To get it optimal—or screenings—before it goes out for shipping. Now, I don't know if this is unusual in operations which involve processing of food or other commodities. There has to be some degree of imperfection allowed, and of course, that becomes a basis by which the company can maximize its profits. It didn't seem wrong to me.

EE: Yes, well, it's a very interesting picture you're painting here. Was any other use made of the screenings that you pulled out? Obviously, the bottle and the dead skunk and so on and so forth had been gotten rid of, but the weed seeds or the seeds of other sorts that were in the grain which the cleaning process would remove, you're saying that. You could end up with what was really No. 1 Northern and no doubt about it. Practically nothing else other than infinitesimal amounts of seeds.

RM: Well, one use for the other stuff would be pellets, which--.

EE: Yes. And UGG A made pellets as well, did they?

RM: They had a pellet plant, and my understanding was that they were--.

EE: And so those were being sold.

RM: So they were--.

EE: But not mixed in with No. 1 Northern.

RM: No, they were sold as animal feed, but I think the market for that was entirely overseas. But again, I knew so little about it. I understood that far. There was another they could use some of the junk they had taken out during the cleaning process.

EE: There was a time when this was garbage so to speak, but then a market was envisaged and developed along the lines you suggest with the European market, I'm sure, as an important--.

RM: I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. I mean, if the customer knows they're getting low-quality pellets, so be it.

EE: Sure. Oh, quite. Yes. Well, a farmer who ends up feeding his cattle straw part of the time is not nourishing them very well in the wintertime either.

RM: Right.

EE: But if he can't afford better than straw, that's what happens and so on.

RM: Sure.

EE: But back to adding a little of the detritus to the--. What was this interesting process of putting some--?

RM: I don't--. You know--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** People. They were the--. That was the intelligence of the elevator, the nerve centre. And they were senior employees who knew. And they actually did have a lot of knowledge. You would have to because you have to understand every quarter, and how to get from A to B, and what should go where. So those people impressed me with the knowledge that they had. But there was also a parallel system in the elevator whereby the government runs an inspection office.

[0:50:39]

EE: Yes, the grain inspectors. I was just thinking of them.

RM: But then the elevator has its own little inspection office.

EE: Yes, it does.

RM: And one of the functions of the elevator's inspection office was to do what I've been referring to earlier, which is mixing in just the right ratios and sort of optimizing their output as it were.

EE: Now, it could be grades of course. You can get away with a certain amount of, let's say, No. 3 wheat in with No. 1 probably. Would that be the kind of mixing that might be going on? Because it would be much less valuable wheat, but if it--.

RM: I'm not sure, but I'm sure they were clever enough to think of that too.

EE: Yeah. That's the one that first comes to the layman's mind here of how to increase--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]**

RM: Thinking this is standard in the food industry. I mean even with a jar of marmalade you're entitled a certain portion of contaminants. Right? So many insect parts, so many pieces of turnip, right? So I hope they don't add that stuff to it in order to increase their margin.

EE: The whole history of government attempts to regulate on behalf of the citizenry involves one element: the takeover of regulation by the industry.

OM: Natural flavours. [Laughing]

EE: It's impossible to avoid. People in the industry understand.

RM: Extra protein as a matter of fact!

EE: And I'm thinking of the railway industry where more than 100 years ago, attempts to regulate it inevitably maybe got into--. Were being told by the big railway companies if you will and so on and so forth. In fact, I never checked the dictionary carefully, but the fact that a gentleman named Albert Fink was involved in it. Fink is a noun we all recognize, probably--. **[..** ***audio skips*****]** Regulation or the failure of regulation being use of how the system.

RM: Yeah.

EE: Well, another. I don't know that people would like--. Well, they would be interested to know this, especially people in the European market. [Laughing] There was a certain measure of adulteration taking place. And of course, the problem of--. Well, I won't expand on the regulation. What are you most--?

RM: It's no--. No, sorry. Go ahead.

EE: Go ahead. You're the narrator here.

RM: But again, although it felt shocking, I'm not sure there's anything wrong with it. You're allowed a certain amount of junk, and if you're below, then why not add some? I mean, it seems wrong, it seems--. But at the same time, you're meeting the government's requirements, right?

EE: Well, the key point would be that if the technical possibility is to have a really pretty clean product, then the government standard should encourage you to achieve that. If the standard set is a weaker one, shall we say, or allows for this kind--. We're not debating this. You're describing what went on and it's fascinating to hear this.

RM: We're not an ethics class. Yeah. [Laughing]

EE: Tempting as it is to create one. [Laughing] What are you most proud of in the work that you did through those three summers? I think you've already hinted at it in terms of talking about the importance of this industry. People involved in food product, I think, feel that all the way from the farmer—and I'm farmer's son from Manitoba—through every step of the process.

RM: Well, it's funny you should say that, because occasionally farmers would come to the elevator for a tour. I don't know why, but they'd sometimes select me to take them on them. And of course, I was terrified. I didn't understand that. Maybe that's why they had me do it. [Laughing] I mean to them, they had a much greater investment in it because this is our grain, and they were fascinated as any farmer by the sheer quantity of stuff going through.

EE: Conceivably shareholders in UGG for that matter, so they had--. **[… *audio skips*]**

RM: But for me—I think for us—there wasn't that kind of personal investment. It was a noisy, dirty, monotonous work environment. I mean, certainly an opportunity in many ways, but not the sort of job that would provide a lot of satisfaction. Again, construction much better that way.

EE: Yes. Do you have any memories, specific memories of these farmers coming through? Conversations you had with them?

RM: Yeah. Although, you know, I wonder what they thought. I can't recall the particular conversational details that you would find interesting.

[0:55:09]

EE: No. But they'd walk through the whole place. You'd show them the various parts of it.

RM: Yeah, show them different floors.

EE: Explain what happened and so on and so forth. It would be a lot of nodding as heads, I suppose, as they--. **[*… audio skips*]** Yes, they are. Oh, they are. For the person who's never been in one, it's very interesting to see the various parts of it.

RM: Yeah, yeah. Because it's just a monolith on the outside, but once you get inside and look at the different parts, it is an interesting structure with how it all works together.

EE: All the various parts of it. There was a model built, wasn't there, of one somewhere in this city, which we would love to get our hands on, but it may be just gone.

RM: Well, that was, I think, United Grain Growers used to take that to their tradeshow each year.

EE: Ok. They had one?

RM: So if you give their head office a call, they're on Villa Street, I think it is.

EE: I'll keep that in mind.

RM: Mention that you remember seeing it at the tradeshow and do they still have it around. Yeah, that would be--. I hope nobody threw that out.

EE: Well, if UGG had one, that would be the one to look for.

RM: It's not UGG anymore. It's Agricore or something.

EE: Well, it's now part of Viterra. The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool acquired Agricore, yeah. The industry has been completely--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** ways and so on and so forth. Do you think that the work you did contributed to Canada's success as an international grain trader? The answer, of course, is "Of course!"

RM: Well, I didn't make much of a contribution, but I can certainly see that this was a big deal for Canada. Yeah. Again, I refer to that sort of sense of smug satisfaction at the time that this was the industry, this was the place to be, which turned out to be based on flawed reasoning.

EE: In terms of the changes that took place.

RM: I don't know whether it will come back. Of course, there's so many variables. Climate changes and what have you.

EE: Yeah, the future is always something one speculates on, isn't it, in more than one way. Was there a sense amongst sort of the workers of Thunder Bay—elevators workers, let's say, as against or vis-à-vis paper mill workers—did you run into each other in bars and was there an--.

RM: Never got any sense of that at all. Didn't get a sense of rivalry.

EE: There weren't any hockey teams as there will have been in earlier times, I imagine? No sports activity based on--.

RM: No competition or interaction as members of a certain employee group. No, nothing. Nothing of that in my experience. I think everyone shared a certain identity as a sort of hourly wage, Thunder Bay, working man, right? So if it wasn't the elevators, it might just as easily have been the railroads or--.

EE: A working man in Thunder Bay as per Tom Dunk's work. [Laughing]

RM: That's right. So there would have been that sense of solidarity, but within that, no. I never had any sense of divisions there.

EE: Have you discussed your experience with Tom at all? Tom Dunk in sociology?

RM: No, not at all.

EE: Could be an interesting panel sometime conceivably. I'm thinking towards--. Well, we have talked--. You referred to some changes that took place in the grain trade. Obviously, the large organizational markets changed, government support, subsidy of the railways changed. Some of these changes took place very soon after you were employed there. And then you've also mentioned some changes in the way in which the grain was unloaded, transported and unloaded, at the elevators. Were there other changes that took place as well, or do you want to expand on any of these in terms of their impact on the--? And then the reduction of the workforce, the growing efficiency. These are all very interesting changes.

RM: Yeah. I'm just, I mean, again, I'm just guessing there as to what would have been the impetus for that, and maybe it was because the industry had turned down, and it just became a lot tougher, and the companies had to look for efficiencies. In another way, cutting down the number of people dedicated to a task, but also looking for technology that might reduce the amount of labour time, increase the productivity of the operation.

EE: Yeah. Right. I don't know whether one could speculate about the development. There was a lot of construction of elevators, wasn't there, through the 1920s. Big crops maybe already in the teens, the development of the Pools on the Prairies—Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and its ownership of all kinds of terminal elevators here—and then whether the '30s must have been tough. And then from the '40s, the war years, through the '80s, perhaps there's a 40-year period during which there was a certain richness or affluence to this matter of moving grain. Or whether the operations of the Wheat Board played a part in that. I'm really speculating here and thinking about it. The wheat agreements right after the Second World War, of course, were hated by the Prairie farmers. Those were the years I was growing up and reading the *Country Guide,* and the price at which grain was sold to Britain right after the war was very unhappy experience for the farmers because they could have done better in other markets.

[1:00:39]

But perhaps it would be the '60s through the '80s, perhaps, the Chinese market opening up and so on, because there were tough years in there. One thinks of the '57 election and some of the stories that I was told of the Wheat Board, and, in fact, one of them I had heard about earlier back in the '50s. The farmer I think in the Selkirk area of Manitoba who was so unhappy with an announcement about the grain trade—it might have been C. D. Howe on the screen, the Minister of Transport—he blew the TV set away with a shotgun blast because he was so unhappy. And then of course, Elvin Hamilton's success, which made the Conservative Party on the Prairies.

RM: He did an Elvis Presley. [Laughs]

EE: in Saskatchewan and other places through the ‘60s in selling wheat to the Chinese. But one wonders whether all of this played into encouraging a certain fatness perhaps, in the elevators. They certainly became leaner later on.

RM: Yeah. Again, my impression was that it was like stepping back in time. And just—not that I have any engineering expertise—but just looking at the design, the set up, the way the process worked, and the age of the structure and the machinery in it, it did look like an operation out of the ‘20s or ‘30s rather than the ‘80s. You know? I guess certain industries do tend to get stuck. You know, the comment has often been made that Britain suffered in the Second World War because its factories weren’t flattened, whereas in Germany they were, and they built new, and it was more efficient and more productive. Britain couldn’t compete. There’s something of that here is that that’s an industry, which developed and grew. And I don’t think there had been any construction since the--. When was the last elevator built, do you know?

EE: That’s a good question. I would think--.

RM: It was a good long time ago.

EE: Maybe finished in the early ‘30s would be probably--. Though I doubt there was any construction after that. It’s been takedown beginning as early as 1978 and probably earlier. I moved to this city and saw Paterson’s Elevator on the Kam being taken down when I was being driven around by a sister-in-law who was helping me get acclimatized to the city before we moved here in the summer of ’78. And so I have a very keen sense of when that Paterson elevator came down, which was poignant for me because my father had sold wheat certainly for most of my years at home to the Paterson elevator in Culross, Manitoba. So his grain was moving through that. The grain that I had helped to move by truck to the granary and was moving through the Paterson Elevator, which was now being taken down.

RM: Although for all it’s antiquatedness, they were shipping an awful lot of grain back then. I mean, you can say the system was working well. [Laughs]

EE: Sure. And the complex here within the constraints was the most intensive and the largest in the world. I think the lower Mississippi had more, but it was more spread out than we had here. So, you’re right. It had terrific capacity, but it became clear that one could do it much more efficiently, then machinery was brought in. Dust control was being pushed I think through the ‘70s for various reasons. Now, were you particularly aware of those improvements in the elevator in terms of--?

RM: I don’t know what it was like before, but it must have been horrendous.

EE: Because it was still bad when you were there?

RM: Because it was very bad when I was there. There was dust everywhere constantly. Part of that was they were running at full tilt. I mean, they were just shipping so much grain, and you can't—past a certain point—you can't contain it anymore. And there was also regular failures of the systems. Filters get clogged and suddenly there's dust everywhere in enormous quantities. Very difficult thing to deal with. Probably the most difficult thing in handling and shipping large quantities of grain is the amount of dust that comes out of it, the fine quality of it.

EE: Yes. Just settles over on everything.

RM: Like snow.

EE: Cars in the parking lot and over a good part of the city, I suppose.

[1:05:00]

RM: Right. And, you know, later on I had a motorcycle at the time. I was riding home. You know your eyes tear a little bit from the wind? And so I'd have these running mascara-like streaks down the side of my face where the dust was coming out.

EE: You didn't have really good clean-up facilities at the elevator?

RM: No.

EE: You didn't go shower at the end of the shift? You went home the way you were.

RM: Most people did. To clean up you'd go to the millwright shop and use compressed air. [Laughing]

EE: Oh, yeah.

RM: Works better than water.

EE: I daresay it does. Yes, indeed. A great deal better. The tradesmen would have a relatively privileged position, I suppose.

RM: Yes.

EE: You've mentioned millwrights and electricians. Plumbers did you say?

RM: No plumbers.

EE: No plumbers.

RM: No.

EE: Primarily electricians and the millwrights.

RM: Yeah. Millwrights. By number, many millwrights. A small electrician shop.

EE: They were essential keeping machinery operating, fixing things when they broke down.

RM: Lot of conveyor belts, the vertical elevators themselves, all the machinery. Yeah, lots of work for millwrights. And of course, dust makes it difficult to keep things lubricated and so things wear out pretty quickly. And a sheet metal shop. Lots of sheet metal which wears out because on the various spouts and things, just the sheer volume.

EE: It does. Grain is corrosive, isn't it? If that's the right word. It just wears things out.

RM: It's corrosive or abrasive.

EE: Well, you've been speaking about construction as a lovely alternative, and I appreciate working with wood a good deal myself. I haven't done very much of it, but I've enjoyed it when I did. But part of me has thought of being a millwright, in a similar kind of crazy way given that you and I are both academics. [Laughs] Blissfully happy in that way of life.

RM: Well, the millwright—speaking of millwrights—I mean I think the most interesting era for millwrights was in the beginning looking after the water mills where the axles for threshing mills were made out of oak, heart of oak. And the process of laying in a new axle meant tremendous skill involved in doing that and using very primitive tools.

EE: And that's when the millwright really justified his name, didn't he?

RM: Yeah.

EE: Because that really is, yes.

RM: Yeah. That's in the history of the millwrighting trade.

EE: It is indeed. Now, what has taken you to that history? Because you're reminding me when you say--. **[… *audio skips*]**

RM: Playing with nuts and bolts myself. A modern millwright is an industrial mechanic. You're doing essentially the same job.

EE: Yeah. Not this kind of--. My environmental history has taken me into similar sorts of areas. One of which is there's that famous article by Lynn White from the late 60s about the way in which the Judeo-Christian tradition in the attitude toward nature, and that nature was desacralized and was available to human beings to use was part of the reason why there were the kind of environmental problems that we faced. And that had been rather an intellectual thing for me until I found myself reading more carefully through the Medieval period. And when I suddenly realized that through let's say the 9th century of the Common Era, as we now say, the monasteries were damming rivers and building mills. You see the connection to the millwright. **[… *audio skips*]**

Of their achievements in using water power than they were of erecting the churches in which God's power was being celebrated, putting it in one pithy phrase. And I found that really intriguing, this use of natural power rather than animal or human power because the Roman era is still really driven by slaves in so many ways. There is that famous flour mill at Barbegal, is it, on the coast of Southern France on the Mediterranean. I think I've mangled the name of the place. But there was a large mill there maybe by the 3rd or 4th century. But this kind of general development of harnessing of water in which the millwright is at work, turning wheat into flour and perhaps grinding other things as well, I mean, that sort of thing comes in Christendom through the Medieval period and becomes general across Europe. And there, of course, the millwright would be working with wood and develop a profession. **[… *audio skips*]**

RM: Once was.

EE: Yes, indeed. That's right. Flowing water and--.

RM: So a millwright would probably travel around from one place to another.

EE: Yes, that's right, learned their trade. Well, besides dealing with change, what other challenges did you face on the job?

[1:10:04]

RM: Hm.

EE: Substance abuse and its consequences one would think could be a challenge. Part of the workforce would be sober, I suppose, were they?

RM: Oh, yes. Yeah. I mean some people were model employees, highly motivated, and interested in maximizing production and taking pride in their job. I don't want to give the wrong impression. But there's another--. Again, this came from--. It struck me as a contrast from construction setting where everyone pretty much worked hard, but there was an attitude problem and so many people--.

EE: At the elevators?

RM: Yeah, the elevators did. I don't know. I don't know where the resentment came from, but it was certainly there. So it was an unpleasant working environment in that sense. That's a very distinct memory I have, the contrast between the construction worker and the grain handler. A very different kind.

EE: I mean this has historical possibilities. I think of the imposition of prohibition late in the Great War, which management was quite pleased by that in many cases and not just the women and the suffragettes and others who were pushing prohibition, the churches, but managers could be as well. And I think that there were some union leaders who discovered they had a more lively work, a more lively membership if they were all sober, whether they Liked it or not. I mean, the veterans came back. They hadn't fought for a dry Canada, so help them! [Laughs] Then of course, we've got government regulation and sale in the 1920s--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** Whether an organization will always, there will always be a sort of a downward pull at it. But anyway, we're on the brink of lapsing philosophical about a workplace, and probably we shouldn't do too much of that.

RM: Yeah. My--. I don't know. It's probably endemic to Canadian industry. I've had that impression.

EE: I suspect in humanity.

RM: Humanity.

EE: Yeah. This will happen any place where the organization--. The union is involved in protecting its members, and so protection of members really for the leadership, can pose enormously difficult issues. You know, they know that someone. In fact, a nice issue to raise would be what would you have to do to get fired? Well, university campuses know this in terms of this. [Laughing] How can you lose tenure? The same issue in principle, but it tends to take different forms. And you would never have had experience of either of those problems, so. For challenges. **[… *audio skips*]**

RM: To drinking at work, you know? What do you do when you go home? I mean, what do you do for fun there? It just seemed really sad, you know?

EE: Yes, separating the workplace from enjoyment seems a sound thing.

RM: I mean, is it the monotony? The sort of--. Of course, this is where your outlook as a student is very different because you're not--. In a lot of the cases, this is lifetime employees doing this for 30-40 years, and what a depressing thought that would be. I remember there was one day walking in, I think it was for evening shift, and coming down out the elevator was a guy. It had been his last day on the job. He was 65, and he would have punched out just like any other day. That's it. After how many decades working there. But also no recognition. He's just punching out and leaving as he would any other hundreds of days while he was around. Again, not a job that gives much opportunity for satisfaction, you know, self realization.

EE: Yeah. As a student, you wouldn't have recognized the guys or whether there was a retirement party once a year or whatever.

RM: Yeah, I'm sure there was a company thing, gold watch or something, but I was never privy to that.

EE: No. It would be one of the disadvantages. Are there other challenges that come to mind? Challenges of remaining healthy and well. Alive.

RM: [Laughs] This surprised me. I don't know if you've heard this from other elevator workers, but the only way into a bin is through the top.

EE: Yeah, that figures.

RM: And a guy has to go in in a swing chair and be lowered in, and occasionally they needed to be cleaned out. So if the grain had been sitting for too long it would become compacted and some grain would get stuck. So the only way to repair that is to send

somebody in with a shovel. So the experience of having this lid opened on the floor, being lowered in 100 feet down in a little chair.

[1:15:18]

EE: Well, these are--. **[*… audio skips*]**

RM: The shipping bins would have to be cleaned after they had pellets in them because the pellets were sticky. They'd hang up a bit. So they'd send us in, in twos. And the shipping bins weren't as deep, but they were very steep because the idea was when the chute was open, the grain would fly out as quickly as possible. But doing that meant sort of scrambling around like a monkey trying to clean off all of the stuck grain, and then going through a little door about, I don't know, this high at the bottom and waiting over by the chute itself. Disconnect your harness and they will drop it through the other side. You hook up again, go back into the adjoining shipping bin, and do the same over there. It was an extraordinary experience.

EE: [Laughs] Gut wrenching.

RM: Not one which people readily volunteer for.

EE: No, no. You have to be drafted for that one.

RM: Or if you're a summer student, you can get tabbed for it because you can't really say no. [Laughs]

EE: No, I can well imagine. And being dropped down into the 100--. **[*… audio skips*]**

RM: Line harness, but you're also in your swing chair, which is connected by cable to the top.

EE: And there's someone at the top watching and listening and so on and so forth.

OM: Waiting.

RM: You hope responsible employees are--. Rather than being outside smoking a cigarette or something like that.

EE: Or putting away the last of the mickey or whatever.

RM: Yeah.

OM: Did you have a little lamp?

RM: Uh, no. They would lower an electric light in, and it sort of bounces around the bottom. Well, it's fairly well illuminated, and interesting acoustics, too, were actually kind of pleasant once you were in there. But very eerie because then you would look up and see this little hole with light from the top where you would come from.

EE: Interesting experiences.

RM: Yeah. And this is just a day in the life of an elevator worker. There was nothing sort of exceptional about doing that.

EE: Right. But it would add spice to the--.

RM: It was certainly exceptional for me. I'd never done anything like it.

EE: So these would be among the vivid memories of the job that you would have.

RM: Yeah.

EE: Are there any other memories?

RM: You know, yeah, there's quite--. One thing. This is the--. **[…** ***audio skips*****]** And maybe it's because of my accident or something. I'm not sure what it is. It's not even accident related, it's just I have this dream where I'm back working there again, and it's not a good feeling.

EE: So does an interview about this to some extent become an unhappy experience?

RM: No, no. Not at all. In fact--.

EE: Because you mentioned the pride in your involvement in a vital industry and so on, but clearly--.

RM: Yeah. Sure. No, and actually, in anticipation of the interview, it sort of got me thinking about it, thinking about it in a way I hadn't for years, and certain memories started coming back about it.

EE: Well, the mind stirs up anxieties and occasionally it works on them. I mean, I don't have many anxieties in my life, but because of the four years when I was MP and flying back and forth, I have had nightmares about missing planes. It almost never happened. I think it may have happened once, but you know, that would be quite a different kind of thing. But those nightmares would be--. **[.. *audio skips*]** What were the most important events that happened in the workplace during your career? It wasn't that long a career. I begin to think we're into the matter of--.

RM: I'm not sure career is the right use.

EE: No. you've got a career here. Do you think it's important to preserve and share Thunder Bay's grain trade history?

RM: Yeah, that would. Share is an interesting idea. It would also be a good idea to preserve an elevator and have it open to the public.

EE: If there's one thing I resent in this city administration's waterfront policy, it's knocking down Pool 6.

RRM: Yeah.

EE: Because that would have been really quite ideal at the south end of Marina Park and so on and so forth. And it proved to be very difficult to knock down, which taught everyone watching it a lesson about how well-built those things were. Concrete and steel.

RM: Oh, yes. Yeah. But I mean, part of their waterfront development work would be done already. They'd have a tourist attraction because, again, it's more interesting than you might think. **[… *audio skips*]** waterfront because you're so high up.

EE: Yeah. Someone who worked for Sask Pool who we interviewed said he had tried to persuade management in Regina that they should preserve one and have it available and so on.

RM: Don't preserve it as it really was, but nice and shiny. [Laughing]

EE: Cleaned out! No desiccated skunk or anything.

RM: A little bit like Old Fort William. I don't believe for a minute that's the way it really was, but it's nicer to think that it is.

[1:20:06]

EE: It doesn't have the aroma level, I'm sure, that it did once upon a time. [Laughing] Rats and mice?

RM: Oh, yes. Rats. We talked--.

EE: Vermin. Owen just wrote vermin. The very same thought.

RM: We talked about the liquor, but not the rats. Yeah, rats. Lots of rats at the time.

OM: Plump.

RM: Yes. And a real scary thing on a midnight shift to come around a corner and be confronted by a wharf rat, although they're usually more frightened than we were. Yeah, there were lots of rats at the time. A nightmare scenario. [Laughing]

EE: Do you think there are any questions that we should have asked which the basic questionnaire approved doesn't include? Well, it includes that question, so we have a basis for asking it.

RM: No, I think you've covered everything well. I can't think of anything offhand that I would have to share with you that you haven't already asked about. Again, not that my experience was all that extensive.

EE: Well, I think what you come to it—or we come together—to memories that are more than a quarter-century old, but they're lively and fresh from your early days.

RM: And you're talking to people who were there before and after I was.

EE: Yes. We've talked to people who have worked for decades in the elevators and so on and so forth.

RM: So you're getting a more complete picture. So I guess my impression, not a really happy, healthy working environment.

EE: Right. Well, that could be the contrast. We have had one interview which we conducted in this room in fact—no, it was in the next philosophy seminar room—with someone--. **[… *audio skips*]** Who spend a lifetime in the industry tend to begin glossing over some things to talk about others, so you've, in fact, provided, as he did, some insights into various aspects of the operations of an elevator that we wouldn't necessarily get from the lifelong employee who we were talking to in his older years.

RM: You know, when I was in highschool, I worked the kitchen at McKellar, and that was a terrific job because you'd go in after school to help get the supper trays ready, and then you clean up the trays after. Put everything away ready for breakfast the next day. Done. Ready for the next day. Sense of accomplishment, recurrent and monotonous. It's the same thing every day, and yet I felt a positive work environment. In contrast to the elevators, which again it's a sort of process thing. Same sort of--. **[… *audio skips*]**

EE: Shipping season was finished when they sort of slowed down for the winter. You weren't there at that time. You were there when it was running full tilt.

RM: No, wasn't part of that.

EE: And so it was 24 hours a day and seven days a week. What impact did you experience from working seven days a week? You were young. You were physically up to it.

RM: It was great. Yeah. Are you kidding? Yeah. I didn't need a day off.

EE: Keenly aware of the money that was flowing in.

RM: Absolutely.

EE: And with an eight-hour shift, you had time left to bend the elbow at the bar for a little bit.

RM: There was still part of the day left. Yeah. Yeah.

EE: As against the 12-hour shifts that came in at some places that struck me as much more deadly.

RM: Yeah. I've seen that change in various areas too.

EE: And then the sliding when you work a couple of days and then you work a couple of nights or whatever. You need a day off after that, surely, at least to recover.

RM: But the elevator did have its moments. I mean, if you're working a midnight shift, the sun's coming up, you can see the sun coming up over the Sleeping Giant, and the world looks a little bit better–things you wouldn't get to see because you aren't normally up at that time of day. Or, you know, being up top and just stepping outdoors and just viewing the panoramic view. Yeah, it had it's--. I wouldn't want to suggest that all of my memories are negative.

EE: No, no. Well, I think you've suggested a variety of interesting and positive memories.

RM: And really, it has to be noisy. It has to be dirty. It has to be dangerous because there are big heavy metal things moving around. So these are just things that are givens. I mean, there's nothing anyone ever could do about that.

EE: No, there certainly aren't. Well, the last couple of questions, one is about memorabilia, and I don't suppose you brought away anything other than interesting leg bones. [Laughing] Interesting x-rays so to speak! X-ray images. But the leg did eventually heal well?

RM: It's been fine, yeah.

EE: No problem at all, eh?

RM: I do have the plate. They took the plate out at some point, so yes, I do have a souvenir of my days at the elevator.

EE: I think I must somewhere have a stainless-steel pin that was screwed into my heel for skeletal traction back in '72, but that was a faculty student football game. I mean, those are the hazards of the academic life.

RM: Oh!

EE: If you get clipped by the president of the student union in a touch football game! [Laughing] When I clean the house up, I'm going to see if I can find that pin. It must be around somewhere. Anyway, that's in terms of memorabilia. Are there any other--? Well, we might just--. Thanks so much, Richard, for giving us this interview.

RM: You're very welcome.

EE: I don't know how long we've been at it but. Hour and a half?

RM: Yeah, I don't have photographs or anything.

OM: I'll just stop that.

End of interview.