

Narrator: Patricia McGonigal (PM)

Company Affiliations: City of Thunder Bay

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Summary: Former city by-law enforcement officer Patricia McGonigal discusses her interaction with operating and abandoned grain elevators throughout her career. She details the kinds of complaints that arose about abandoned/vacant properties, as well as the occasionally strenuous task of determining legal property owners and property boundaries. She discusses the costs associated with the upkeep of vacant lots and the growing lack of interest in taking responsibility for these kinds of properties.

Keywords: City of Thunder Bay; Municipal government; Municipal by-laws; Thunder Bay grain elevators; Abandoned elevators; abandoned buildings; Industrial properties; Property maintenance; Corporate citizenship

Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: It is July 30, 2014, and this interview is taking place at the home of Nancy Perozzo. I will have the person that I'm interviewing introduce herself and also just briefly tell us her connection to the grain elevators in Thunder Bay.
PM: My name is Trish McGonigal, and for approximately 23 years I was a senior licensing and enforcement officer for the City of Thunder Bay. And during my tenure there, I dealt with the upkeep of various operational and non-operational properties that surrounded the grain elevators and the railway property abutting those properties.
NP: Now, I understand from a personal connection with you that you had a family member in the grain industry.
PM: Yes, actually, my dad was a grain inspector.
NP: Whenever we have some people that we interview who have family connections to the trade, I just—out of curiosity—ask if there's anything that you remember about your dad's career?

PM: I think the most memorable memory I have of dad was when he took me to the grain elevators and showed me all of the grain storage areas. I was quite impressed with the movement within those grain bins, and he explained to me that the movement was because of the rats and mice. That was rather surprising. I hoped that I never ran into any. Which led to a lot of stories he used to tell me about how they would walk around with shovels and sticks and dispatch those rats that decided to go away from the grain bins into the offices. He also told me about the cats that they used to have there as well, and he used to bring some of those cats home as family pets, which weren't exactly great family pets. [Laughs] So those are my remembrances of my dad's job.

NP: How old would you have been, do you think, when you took that tour?

PM: I was less than 11 years of age.

NP: Did you go to the top of the elevator?

PM: Yes. He took me up. We walked up the stairs, actually, to the top of one elevator.

NP: That must've been a bit scary!

PM: Yeah, it was. I didn't like--. I have a thing with heights, and I didn't particularly find it pleasantly exciting. So he took me down because he realized that I was not enjoying myself. Had much more fun with the rats in the grain bins. [Laughter]

NP: I don't think you mentioned your dad's name.

PM: George Marks.

NP: Now you ended up, in a way, working somewhat related to the rats, I think, in the grain bins in your work. I know that, because of confidentiality issues with you being a civic employee, that you aren't able to talk specifically about elevators or names, so just for that reason I know that you're going to be fairly general in your comments. When I first talked to you about your connection, I was asking you about being able to track down records of the elevators—their official locations, the owners, the ownership changes over the years. So maybe you could just tell me a little bit about searching titles related to the elevators, those properties, and what kinds of difficulties it could present to a person like you?

PM: Well, when we receive complaints about the conditions of properties, we need to research out who the owners of those properties are and notify them of what our inspections find. And if it's contrary to any of the municipal by-laws, then we need to

advise them of those violations and have them bring their properties into compliance. So when I went to research out some of the sites, I found that some elevators were owned by private companies, and they were numbered companies. And trying to figure out who these numbered companies were and follow a chain of command, if you will, as to who I was going to contact was very tedious and involved, to the extent where the research may have taken me six or seven months to finally get in contact with an individual, only to find out that they no longer own it and that they had sold it to somebody else. They weren't that forthcoming with the information, so I would then have to go back into the records and try and determine who the owners were then.

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So the registry office is the first place that I would have gone to do records searches. Sometimes I would do it myself, sometimes I would have the City solicitor's staff do that research for me depending on the timeframe that I needed to get the information. Once we did find out, however, who owned the properties, other legal things came into play because if it was federally owned, then municipal by-laws did not apply to the upkeep of these properties. So I would have to try and get them to take a moral stand on being a good corporate citizen and bring their properties into compliance with municipal by-laws, even though they didn't legally have to do it.

NP: So when you say "federal," you meant incorporated federally? So companies incorporated federally like railways?

PM: Yes.

NP: Ok. What year would it have been that you started doing work where it would take you to the elevator property? I'm just trying to get a sense of how far back it goes to--.

PM: Well, I started in the Licensing and Enforcement department in 1987, and I started investigating property standards issues right from that date on.

NP: So, over the time that you did this type of work, did you see the closure of several elevators? Or were many of them already closed down by the time you started doing your work?

PM: Well, I think the majority of the complaints that I personally dealt with had to do with elevators that were no longer in operation. Some of them ended up to be in operation. But you have to understand that the nature of the complaints that would come in would be--. It would be difficult to ascertain whether it was the railroad property or the elevator property that was responsible for wherever the violations were. So the city had to make up their minds whether or not they wanted to put the money out to do legal

surveys of these properties to determine ownership of them. So it was decisions made beyond my level when it came to having to force the railroad or the elevators to actually clean their properties up, whether or not the city was prepared to put that kind of money out to determine who the properties belonged to.

NP: I would have thought that with a property that changed hands that somebody would have had legal descriptions outlining the boundaries of their property, but not so?

PM: It's not that they don't have legal descriptions of their properties because you can see that on paper. But when you're actually physically out there, you're not able to determine, you know, 100 yards from another 100 yards, unless you actually know where the boundaries are. And so that's where a lot of the issues came up. The railway would say it's not their property or the elevators would say it's not their property. It was the railroad's. And the railroads would say it was the other.

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Where we were able to be more cognisant of who was in violation was when it was buildings and structures directly on abandoned elevator sites. Most of those sites were sold to private companies.

NP: Now with the numbered companies, in your opinion, was the fact that they were numbered partially in order to make it difficult to track them down?

PM: I don't know if that--. That was never part of my mindset when I was doing this. The problem with numbered companies is that you have to do a corporate search, which is much different than just a registry search. And you need to have proper legal descriptions, and you have to have the proper number associated with that business, because if you're out by one number, one digit, one whatever, you're not going to get your corporate search done adequately for legal purposes. So that's what took up the most of the time, I found, in my research.

[telephone rings]

NP: Sorry about that. So let's talk a little bit about the origin of the complaints. Were they pretty standard types? Who would be most likely to complain? And what were the kinds of complaints you dealt with?

PM: Mostly the complaints that we dealt with had to do with the buildings themselves or the property. And various city departments would involve themselves in asking us to take a look at a property if they were out there for another reason. For

example, let's say the fire department is out there because of a grass fire. They notice when they were putting out the grass fires that some of their staff may become injured because of open wells or debris within the property that, when you're fighting fires, you don't expect it to be there. So they would lodge complaints. Or if they were fighting a fire there and the fire was started within an abandoned building or an abandoned elevator—the floors in a lot of these elevators would have deteriorated—and the fire department would not allow the firemen to go into these buildings for fear of injury, severe injury.

If we got those types of complaints, our property standards by-law would say, "If you have a vacant building on a vacant piece of property, the laws are that all means of ingress and egress, they have to be boarded up, properly boarded up against unlawful entry." And in the case of, let's say, elevators, that's a lot of wood to board these places up. That's a big expense. So the city recognizes that. The city can do the work themselves and apply it to taxes, but in order to do that, you have to have a proper owner in which to apply these repairs. Plus, if it's, once again, owned by a federal agency, then our by-laws don't apply, so our legal department would have to determine whether or not we have the right to go and clean up the property and put it on the taxes.

So the fire department would complain. People that worked in the areas would complain. People that drove by the areas would complain, which they had the right to do, you know? Because most elevator properties about railroad properties—and every company nowadays is trying to budget—and one of the things that I've found that they did in their budgets to reduce it was to take out their property maintenance budgets. So instead of, let's say, cutting the grass on the property or painting buildings or fixing fences two or three times a year, they would cut the grass maybe once a year.

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NP: And what kind of success did you have in persuading people to do what they needed to do?

PM: Not much. Not much because, as I said, when an elevator property is abandoned basically—like some of them have been—and some of these numbered companies have walked away from them, it's up to the city then to determine whether or not we're going to go in there and maintain these properties at a large cost to the taxpayers of the City of Thunder Bay. So it's a decision that's made at a level that was beyond my--. It was more of a political decision.

When I was in contact with some of the different organizations for some of the railway companies or with some of the privately owned elevators that were still in operation, they couldn't see the—at first—they couldn't see the importance of an industrial property, which it is zoned, having to be maintained to the same level as a residential property. And I can certainly appreciate their mindset on that. But where I was coming from was at intersections in roads leading into the property to areas where firefighters may have to fight fires that started accidentally or on purpose, they should take a proactive approach so that nobody gets hurt in

these areas. And so I would ask them to voluntarily maintain their properties more often. And as I said, some companies did it—especially at road intersections—and some companies would not do it.

NP: Hm. Were there any issues with operating elevators, or were they pretty much—just because of other rules that apply to them, say from the standpoint of food safety—were the operating elevators ever issues?

PM: Well some, as I said, some of the working elevators—if my recollection serves me right—the only time we heard from anybody was if there was near-miss for an accident, such as the lots becoming overgrown and interfering with right-of-way accesses or interference at intersections where they couldn't see other vehicles approaching. So those ones were easily fixed because most of the businesses that were operating there, the safety of their personnel, they wanted to enhance. So they would go in and they would at least cut back from the roadways and from the rail crossings. But in the abandoned ones or the ones where they were no longer operating but not abandoned, then it was—I found—it was a much more difficult thing to do.

NP: Now one of the things that—and this may have nothing to do with it but—unkept property and-- I understand that at one point, elevators used to dump, let's say, damaged grain, which would attract vermin and wildlife and things like deer, which could be a traffic hazard. Was that ever an issue?

[0:19:59]

PM: No. The only time we dealt with grain and rats was railway, when residences abutted railway properties that hauled grain and sometimes the grain would escape the cars. And, you know, when you have dumps of grain, you're going to have mice and rats. So they wanted— property owners in the vicinity—wanted the rail companies to come in and clean it up. As far as dumping large amounts on large tracks of land, no we never got any calls on that.

NP: Did you have to go into the elevators at all?

PM: Yes.

NP: And what are your remembrances?

PM: Very dangerous buildings because of the level of deterioration and abandonment of them. As I said with the complaints that we had received in relation to boarding up some of these elevators, the furthest I could get in was just at the one opening. I wouldn't go any further because if a fireman's not going to go into a building, I'm not going to go into a building. [Laughter] And

you could tell just from the lack of planking on floors and the ceilings had fallen in, not an environment that you want to put yourself into.

NP: Mmhmm.

PM: As far as being on the property itself, there was a lot of debris and junk. And when you have any abandoned sites, people will take their household junk and bring it there and dump it, rather than go to the city disposal sites. So there was a lot of that going on as well, which, when you own a piece of property, it's very irritating for the owners to get a call from the city saying, "You've got a garbage dump happening here." They didn't put it there, so they could not see the reason why they'd have to remove it. But unfortunately, you own property, you're responsible for it.

NP: Are there any other questions that I should've asked you? Any other things that, from your experience in working with elevators—related to your job or not—that you'd like to add to--?

PM: Well, I think that being in the business of by-law enforcement for so many years, one of the things that disturbs me about a lot of businesses—and I'm not just talking about abandoned grain elevators, but any vacant buildings and property within the city of Thunder Bay—to try and convince the owners to take some civic pride and spend **some** money to improve the appearance of the lot-- . Or in the case of some of these where people get injured or die because of lifestyle or whatever it happens to be, I get very concerned about that. Personally, I think that the elevator buildings are majestic buildings. I think they're like giants on the waterfront. A can of paint goes a long way. Yes, it's going to be a big can of paint, [laughs] but it's a can of paint just the same. And even though they may be vacant, I think that just sprucing them up would show some pride instead of just walking away from it saying, "It's no longer my problem."

NP: I don't know if you know the answer to this question, but what is the regulation when you shut down a building like an elevator? Is there any sort of requirement?

PM: Well, as I said, it depends on who owns it. If it's a federally owned building or a federally owned property, municipal by-laws don't necessarily apply unless it's an emergency situation. Then there is some legislation, I do believe—it may have changed since I retired. But if it is a privately owned building, then the buildings need to be boarded up on any entrances against unlawful entry.

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NP: So does that mean windows?

PM: It means windows, it means doorways, it means any kind of openings that people can gain access into the building. So if something is on level three of a building, but there are no staircases leading up there, then we're not going to ask them to--. Well, the city never usually asks anybody to board up after that. Although, a lot of corporations used to build up the whole building just so that there would be no weather entering the building and further deteriorating the interior of the structure because they had plans, I guess, to sell the buildings and, of course, recoup as much of their money as possible.

NP: You mentioned people, and I think you commented "lifestyle." Were there incidents of people getting severely injured or injured on these abandoned properties?

PM: That's one thing I'm not at liberty to answer.

NP: Oh, ok. Not even in a general sense?

PM: No.

NP: Yeah. So people do or don't go into them?

PM: I'm sure that other agencies within the city could probably answer that question. But what I had found, historically, with any abandoned buildings, they're always going to be used by people that aren't authorized to be there. Whether or not the elevators had that problem or not--.

NP: Yes, they did, because other people have spoken about it. Especially one fellow who was with the scrap, worked at a scrap dealership. He said there would be sort of the official demolition of the buildings, but then there would also be the people that would just go in unofficially and scavenge whatever they could.

PM: Yeah, there was a lot of that going on.

NP: Yeah. And that one person had fallen to his death as a result of being unauthorized in a building. Did you have a favourite elevator? Or you didn't get to know them that well?

PM: No, I didn't really have a favourite elevator.

NP: Were they all pretty much the same in your mind?

PM: I think some had deteriorated more than others. I think that some of them that were more recently closed were not in a state of disrepair that would concern me as a by-law enforcement officer. Although, the yards probably could've been kept cut more, looked after more there. And then there were a few elevators that I said were very much a hazard to even enter into. But no, I didn't have any favourite elevators.

NP: Ok. So if you have nothing else to add to your remembrances.

PM: I really can't think of anything else that I can talk about without getting myself in trouble over confidentiality, so. [Laughter] I think maybe we could leave it at--. Except to say that I don't want people to think that it was always a negative association with the elevators, per se. It was just a matter of finding out who legally owned the properties. That was the hardest part of doing my job. And if I did get a hold of the wrong person, the lack of energy on the other person's part to give me any further information to bring a resolution to the problem, it was frustrating to say the least. But.

NP: Well, that's in keeping with what other people have said as well, and just common sense. Because we've interviewed people who've talked about housekeeping within elevators, operating elevators, and they've said, "Some managers were good housekeepers, and some weren't."

PM: Mmhmm.

[0:30:09]

NP: And some you didn't even have to write up, and others you would be pulling teeth to get them to do what they were required to do. So there was just different methods of operating, even within the same company.

PM: Yeah. I think, Nancy, what I found distressing—not only with the elevators but with most other properties—is when you're dealing with corporations, their bottom-line dictates very much what the public sees. And the very first thing to go, in a lot of places, is the budget for maintenance. The last, I would say, 20 years, the budgets were going lower and lower to nonexistent with a lot of vacant buildings and properties. And that's a shame.

NP: Yeah.

PM: Especially our waterfront because our waterfront is very visible to people. There's a main thoroughfare that goes through there for people that come and go to work, you know, using the north-south corridor, and for people who use the lake for recreation. When they go by these abandoned sites and they see no attempt by the city—that's what they assume—that the city doesn't take an active role in it or the owners of the buildings aren't taking an active role in beautifying the waterfront, then it speaks badly about the city, period. Never mind the grain elevators or the railways. It speaks badly about everybody.

NP: Mmhmm. One last question. I think you know that Friends of Grain Elevators is working on trying to get an elevator interpretive centre.

PM: Mmhmm.

NP: Set up in Thunder Bay.

PM: Yeah, you had mentioned that.

NP: Yeah. So as sort of a general citizen of Thunder Bay and somebody who's had some familiarity with the grain industry and the elevators, what do you think that centre should feature?

PM: Well, I've always been a people person, so I think I would like to see--. There's nothing that intrigues me more than seeing old pictures of employees gathered around their workplace; all the different machinery that has come and gone and been replaced through automation, just the evolution of the grain industry in Thunder Bay from its glory days till now. Not that I'm looking at it as a depressing thing, but as a historical fact that industrial towns are slowly going away. I think it's important that your organization keep it alive in peoples' memories. Because it was the mainstay of Fort William and Port Arthur.

NP: Great. We look forward to a generous contribution from you--. [Laughter]

PM: All right. You'll get my \$10 tomorrow! [Laughter]

NP: Thank you very much for your perspective, which is unusual. But I think it fits so nicely into--. I started taking notes for this project. I called it "Elevators Up and Down."

PM: Mmhmm.

NP: And your work really reflected the implications of the “down” side of it.

PM: Mmhmm. Yes.

NP: Which is, I agree with you, an important part of history, even if its not--.

PM: Yeah, the thing to keep in mind too, when elevators close and people walk—and some companies actually walked away from the buildings—to expect the city to demolish something of that magnitude is huge on the taxpayers of Thunder Bay. So I can understand why people do, or businesses or corporations do what they do, but I don’t agree with being able to abandon a building of that size and just leave it crumble, and not expect some kind of responsibility to clean it up.

[0:35:15]

NP: Yes. Well, I would hope that maybe there’s a happy middle ground that they don’t have to be demolished to be safe. And they can be part of Thunder Bay’s history as long as the land that they stand on is not needed for any better purpose.

PM: Yes.

NP: Because although it does, as you said, cost to make them safe, it costs a lot more to take them down.

PM: Yes, exactly.

NP: Yeah. Ok. Well, thank you very much!

PM: You’re welcome.

End of Interview.