

**Narrator:** Tom McKinnon (TM)

**Company Affiliations:** Thunder Bay Grain Trimmers Ltd.

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**Interviewer:** Ernie Epp (EE)

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**Summary:** In his two-part interview, retired grain trimmer and general manager of Thunder Bay Grain Trimmers Ltd. Tom McKinnon discusses his and his family's long connection to the grain industry in Thunder Bay. He first describes his family's connection to the grain trimmers from the association's inauguration in Thunder Bay, and he explains the grain trimmers' responsibilities for loading grain ships to full capacity. He discusses some of the other duties of grain trimmers, like coordinating with ship's officers, moving around the harbour to different grain elevators, and working as longshoremen for package freight in the off-season or overtime hours. McKinnon describes the working conditions on the ships, including potential health risks because of grain dust and loading in different kinds of weather. He recalls various changes over his career, including technological advancements and automation, elevator improvements due to the Seaway opening, larger ships, different commodities handled, and a reduction in alcohol use on the job. He then discusses his move into the office as manager in charge of matching crews of trimmers to ships in the harbour. Other topics discussed include the grain trimmers' association with the International Longshoremen's Association, ship inspections, nepotism appointments to the company, a story of a near accident loading a saltie, and memorabilia and pictures from his career. In the second part of the interview, McKinnon describes an artifact—his grandfather's hand-carved wooden shovel.

**Keywords:** Thunder Bay Grain Trimmers Ltd.; Grain trimmers; Grain transportation—ships; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Grain elevators—equipment and supplies; Bulk carrier ships; Lakers; Ocean-going vessels; Package freighters; Longshoremen; International Longshoremen's Association (ILA); Labour unions; St. Lawrence Seaway; Keefer Terminal; Health & safety; Grain dust; Automation; Alcohol use; Ship inspection; Paterson Elevator; UGG Elevator M; Canada Malt Elevator—Thunder Bay; Canada Steamship Lines; SWP Pool 7A

### Audio Part One

Time, Speaker, Narrative

EE: I'll sit a little closer. [Laughing]

OM: Okay. Let's try this again.

EE: Well, why don't we start by your giving us your name, Tom, and then telling us how you came to work in the grain industry.

TM: Well, I'm Tom McKinnon. I'm a retired grain trimmer now—for a few years I've been retired. I went to high school and graduated from high school, and I worked part of a summer driving a truck for Nesco Engineering delivering bathtubs and toilets, et cetera. At the end of the summer, I wasn't going to university because there was eight in our family, and we just couldn't afford it at that time. I was the second oldest, and we were trying to look after the younger ones, get them into university. So, I ended up grain trimming because--. Started on grain trimming on the day after Labour Day in 1951.

EE: 1951?

TM: Yeah.

EE: And you were how old at that point?

TM: 18. I just--.

EE: 18?

TM: Yeah.

EE: You'd been born in--?

TM: 1933.

EE: May of 1933, from what you said earlier.

TM: Yeah, May the 3rd, '33.

EE: So, when you started just after Labour Day, you weren't the first, I understand, in your family to work in this business.

TM: No, my father was a grain trimmer at the time, and my grandfather was one of the original. He wasn't there when they first started grain trimming in 1884. The Fort William and Port Arthur Grain Trimmers Association, they formed a sort of a company. It wasn't a company as such at that time. It was just a group of men in the two cities, and they started loading boats. My grandfather's father-in-law was one of the originals. He and my grandfather ended up trimming, and then my father. So, I followed in his footsteps.

EE: Were you expecting to do that even though you were working for Nesco in the summer?

TM: No, I didn't have any idea when I got out of high school. I finished high school that year, and I didn't know what I was going to do, whether I was going to drive a truck. [Laughs] But I started trimming, and I say I never had another job after that.

EE: So, your father hadn't been talking up your becoming a grain trimmer and getting you set for it?

TM: No, no. Not at all. No, we didn't know what direction we were going at that time. We lived right behind the Co-Op Dairy in Thunder Bay—or in Port Arthur—at the time, and I just spent a lot of time working at the dairy at nights and weekends and that. There was a bakery, Aunt Martha's Bakery, across the street and I worked there part-time trying to help out the family. Like I say, there was eight of us. So, we didn't know what we were going to do. I ended up trimming forever, and I enjoyed every minute of it! [Laughs]

EE: I'm sure you did, and we'll hear all about that!

TM: Yeah!

EE: I'm curious about the traditions that you heard about, the knowledge of how the business started and your family's involvement because you will have heard some of that. Was your grandfather still alive?

TM: No, he died the year before I started. He died in 1950.

EE: Oh, but he was alive then for your growing up years?

TM: Oh, yeah, yeah. I don't remember a lot of it because the trimmers--. When navigation closed in the winter—and it was always navigation closed December the 12th because of insurance reasons—the ships had to leave the dock by midnight on December the

12th for many years until I don't know exactly what year it was. The shipping companies carried their own insurance, so they extended their season after that.

EE: So, with the closure, what would your grandfather do? Go on holiday?

TM: No, most of them worked. A lot of them worked in the bush. My grandfather had a sawing machine for sawing firewood, and he had a team of horses. He used to haul this machine around, this great big saw, and they'd cut up firewood and that for people in the winter. My father, I know, worked in the bush because he had some relatives that worked in the bush also. They went out and hauled, cut pulpwood and that in the winter. Myself, after I started working with the trimmers, one of the trimmers' father owned the Fort William Ice Company and a lot of us worked at Boulevard Lake cutting ice. Occasionally we'd go up to Sioux Lookout and cut ice for the railroad, and they would store this ice in the icehouse. There was one in Fort William and one at the corner of Bay Street in Port Arthur. Bay and Cumberland Street there's a big icehouse there CNR [Canadian National Railway] had.

**[0:05:02]**

EE: Something that was very important before refrigeration really took over.

TM: Yeah, that's right. It gave us all a job because it was only for a month or six weeks or something, but it was pretty intense, hard work. Yeah. But that passed the winter for most of us. Occasionally, when I wasn't working at the icehouse or something I had three young girls for a family, and I was trying to raise them because there wasn't an awful lot of money at the time, so we had to keep going. I worked at the curling club or something, finding different jobs and that. All the trimmers seemed to find a job of some sort during the winter to fill in the time anyway.

EE: Yeah. We'll develop the picture further. So, that's when you began working in the grain industry in 1951, and you worked there then for 52 years you were saying.

TM: Yeah.

EE: So, that makes it '03, just six years ago you retired.

TM: Yeah, yeah, that's right. Exactly. Yeah.

EE: What was the organization? You say it started as an association.

TM: Yeah, it was an association. It was called eventually—I don't know what the original--. Actually, I had a book that they used to have their meeting with, but I gave it to my nephew Bradley a couple years after I retired. I gave him the book just for history so he could have it, and it was the minutes of all their meetings and that.

EE: A record of all of the meetings of the association?

TM: Well, not right from the very beginning. From the 1900s, the early 1900s.

EE: So, the better part of 100 years?

TM: Yes, that's right. Well, there was two books. This was the original, and then actually I think, if I'm not mistaken, there's a charter. They formed a union in 1903. They belonged to the union International Longshoremen's Association [ILA], and I think the charter is still hanging on the wall in the trimmers' office in the Chapple Building. The years ever since that, we have never had—well, not we—the grain trimmers never had a labour stoppage. Never had any problem with labour as far as going on strike or anything, forever. They never had a problem with that.

EE: With whom did the trimmers deal? With the--?

TM: With the shipping companies directly.

EE: With the shipping companies because you were working on the ships.

TM: Yeah, we had a contract with the shipping companies to load the ships.

EE: Were they organized? Did they have a council or whatever, an organization of themselves? Or did you deal with the individual shipping companies?

TM: No, we dealt with--. They had a committee as such, each company. There was, well, years ago there was only three or four companies, whereas now there's quite a few smaller companies. Paterson Steamships and Upper Lake Shipping and Canada Steamship Line [CSL] and Misener were the big companies in around the '50s. [...*audio skips*] Have three or four guys we would meet with and refresh the contract and that whenever need be. So, we just dealt with them directly. Actually, you say we never really had anything to do with the elevators as such. We'd go to work, we'd walk down the dock, and go directly aboard the ship

and put the spouts aboard the ships when we were getting there. So, we really had no dealings with the elevator companies as such. Yeah.

EE: How large an organization was it? How large was the union would you say?

TM: At times there was over 200 trimmers at one time. I know—and this was after the Seaway opened in 1959—we supplied a lot of labour for the Keefer Terminal for unloading general cargo and that.

EE: Because you were longshoremen after all.

TM: Yeah, and they formed another union at that time, another local. It wasn't the grain trimmers local, it was the longshoremen unloading these salties and that. Yeah.

EE: I see. Well, let's press on. Who did you work for during this time? Well, it was the shipping companies.

TM: That's right.

EE: The shipping lines. What was the work that you did?

TM: We loaded the ships. [Laughing]

EE: Why don't you expand on that because you had mentioned directing the grain and so on.

TM: Yeah, we put the, like I say, we go aboard the ships and put the spouts. At the time when I first started in the '50s, it was all hand work, whereas after the Seaway was built, they had to have bigger spouts, longer spouts, higher spouts. They had to raise spouts up because the ships were much larger. Originally, before the Seaway opened, some of the ships would only carry 4,000 metric tonne of grain, whereas now they carry 30,000 tonne. They would take almost maybe nine or ten times the--.

**[0:10:29]**

EE: Sure. These little canallers that used to go through the Welland Canal particularly.

TM: Exactly. Yeah, and the Lachine Canal, they'd go down through there. There was only a 14-foot draft, and there was a lot of traffic between here and Georgian Bay with smaller package freight, and between here and Toronto. They'd bring all their groceries and that for Thunder Bay—Port Arthur and Fort William—came by ship in package freighters. So, they would bring this freight up and go back with grain, loaded grain. It was very difficult to load those package freighters. [Coughs] Excuse me.

EE: I bet. Yeah, that would be a real challenge.

TM: They had two decks in them, and to try and get the compartments full down below it was very difficult because there's a vacant space, say, in the cargo holds, and they had to try and get these full. That's why these wooden shovels, we would be in under the second deck—below decks we would call it—and try and shovel this. They were very fussy. They would make you get every corner tight. They were down there checking. Some of the package freighters just had little holes like that in this 'tween deck, and you'd have to fill those with a spout or shovel all the grain into these little-- . Way back in the farthest corner. So, it was very difficult. Like to load some of those package freighters, it would take you eight or ten hours to load 4,000 tonne. Whereas with the big bulk freighter nowadays, like Pool 7A, they can load 4,000 tonne an hour or something. They can load a big hold in one hour. They had to raise the spouts eventually after the Seaway opened. I don't know if I'm repeating myself or something.

EE: Don't worry about that!

TM: Yeah. But they'd have to raise these spouts up, and I believe—if I'm not mistaken—I think Paterson Elevator was the first one to-- . [...*audio skips*] Those spouts were only 30 or 40 feet from the water level, whereas the high spouts were up about 85, 90 feet to get the outside of the hold full.

EE: This was the elevator down on the Kam or up the Kam River?

TM: That's right. Right at the bridge there.

EE: Which was being knocked down in 1978 when we moved to town. [Laughs]

TM: That's right.

EE: Kind of traumatic to see that because my father used to sell all his grain to Paterson, so.

TM: Oh, really?

EE: Through that elevator from the farm in Manitoba. I'm curious as a farm boy who has moved grain, spread it in a granary, how cool were the ships? How cool was it down there in the hull or how hot did it get?

TM: Not really.

EE: It wasn't hot?

TM: No. The worst thing was the dust, of course.

EE: Yes, terrible dust, I'm sure.

TM: Yeah. That's originally why they had wooden shovels in these package freighters, we called them, that had the double decks in them. Even after that when they had just the one hold, you'd still have to get in there and shovel. So, the wooden shovel, if you were using a metal shovel in the cargo hold and you hit the metal beams or something, you'd have spontaneous combustion. You could have an explosion.

EE: You could cause a spark, yeah.

TM: Apparently that's the story I got anyway is why they had wooden shovels.

EE: Sure. It makes very good sense. It might not do a lot of damage to the ship, I suppose, depending on how big the explosion was, but it certainly could do damage to the person working there I would imagine.

TM: [Laughing] Oh, yeah! That's right.

EE: Because I'm imagining an iron steel hull would--. Well, explosions are--. Yeah, a wooden shovel would make good sense. So, it wasn't necessarily sweaty, and of course the grain was clean. It didn't have lots of thorns in it.

TM: No, it wasn't very clean. [Laughing] I remember once they used to—I don't know if you're familiar with the screenings, refuse screenings, it's just like all of the scrap out of it—we loaded a ship at Pool 6 elevator, which is now gone. We loaded, the ship's name was *Engstrom*, the *Walter P. Engstrom*. I'll never forget it. Took most of these screenings to Duluth and they made



pellets out of them in Duluth. But it was very hard to ship, get this stuff into the spouts, get it elevated out of the bins and that. This one night we were there for 12 hours, and we loaded four tonnes. It was so slow it would sometimes just dribble out very slowly.

**[0:15:19]**

EE: Yeah, because it's light.

TM: Yeah, there's nothing to it.

EE: No substance to it.

TM: It's just like garbage, really. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Eventually, I guess, the pellets were made here in town at the elevators, were they, in order to avoid that kind of business?

TM: Yeah, quite a few elevators made--. Yeah, yeah. When they built these new spouts, previously--. Some of the ships were big. Like CSL had some ships—I remember in the early '50s and 1940s—CSL had some bigger ships like the *Lemoyne*. I remember it was 68 feet wide or something. Well, some of those spouts at the elevators would only reach halfway out to the hold. So, we had what we called a box spout. It was a big metal spout about 30 feet long. It would be about 2 feet wide and a foot high, and we would attach that to the shipping spout off the elevator and put a ladder across the hatches to hold this up. Then we'd have to shovel it from the end of this box spout to the outside of the ship to get the hold filled. Yeah, it was awful! [Laughs] It was real labour. Yeah.

EE: Nothing very glamorous about this job.

TM: [Laughing] No, it really wasn't. It's much better now. Everything is pushbutton. It's all electric.

EE: But it was labour until, what, the '70s, '80s?

TM: Well, no. Like I say, after the Seaway opened, things improved a lot. Yeah. But some of the elevators were slow. It was 10 years or so before they--. [...*audio skips*]

EE: The equipment.

TM: Yeah, they weren't getting the business, so I guess they had to improve their loading facilities, yeah.

EE: So, a typical day on the job is--. Did you work at one elevator as a rule, or did you move around to any--?

TM: No, no. We moved around. Yeah. Like if a ship, they would only load part of a load because the elevator would only have so much of this one commodity, like say [No.] 2 Northern or something. At the time, that's what it was called was Northern, the grade of the wheat. They would have to go to another one, so our gang would follow generally.

EE: Stay on the ship actually or drive over to the--?

TM: No. Yeah, or take—in the early days, of course—they'd take the streetcar or something. I remember riding the bus. We went on a ship--. We didn't have any money at that time, so some of us young guys, we rode the ship over, and we got out and it was--. [...*audio skips*] Steamship Lines. We left Stewart's Elevator at the time it was called, and we went out and we were supposed to go to Richardson Elevator. Well, because of the weather we couldn't go, so we went out and we anchored. So, we spent the night out in the bay up in the forepeak of the ship, bouncing around up there. Eventually, the next day he had to go up the Kam River to tie up because the weather was so bad, so we got off the ship. It was pouring rain. We got soaking wet. We ran over and caught the bus across the tracks there off Simpson Street. [Laughs] We all had our coveralls on, our shovels and that, and this bus driver's ready to throw us off, I think. But that was just one of the joys of being a grain trimmer. [Laughs] But most of the time we had to follow the ship from one elevator to the other.

EE: And the equipment—you just alluded to it—you were wearing coveralls. Any special footwear or--?

TM: No. We had to wear safety boots.

EE: Was there any other equipment that you--?

TM: Yeah, well each elevator—they belonged to us—we called them plows. After they got these high spouts, some of them still wouldn't reach the outside of some of these ships because most of these ships now are 70 feet wide, eh? The spouts wouldn't even reach them, so we had a plow. It's a piece of metal about three feet long and two feet wide with a couple of wooden handles on them, and we used that to direct the grain to fill up the cargo hold.

EE: Down in the hold?

TM: Yeah. This was mainly when we got up near the top to trim it off, just to get it out. Like I say, a lot of times we would put a ladder across the hatch, which some of them were 20 feet wide. So, we put a ladder across there. The ladder may have been 15 feet, 20 feet away from the edge of the hatch, so we would put the—sorry, I've gone blank, the plow [laughs]—we'd put the plow on the ladder, and it would shoot off this metal to fill it up. Then we'd have to shovel a lot of it too in the last 10 feet or so to get the holds full because the holds had to be full. Particularly with flax, which I don't know you're probably familiar with that.

**[0:20:37]**

EE: Oh, I'm familiar with flax. Slippery stuff that it is. [Laughing]

TM: Yeah, exactly. They're very fussy. They always had an inspector come and make sure their holds were really full. They were very concerned about the flax because it was almost like water, and it would shift around. If you didn't get the one corner of the hatch full, the ship would take a bit of list or something, and it was going to stay there. It's not going to go back like water or something. It's going to stay where it goes. Yeah.

EE: Yeah. This would be their own inspector, I suppose.

TM: Insurance, yeah. It was for the ship's insurance because if the ship wasn't properly trimmed, they could be in trouble.

EE: Would an inspector clear the--. [...*audio skips*]

TM: Close the hatches until the inspector got there. He had to come down. We phoned him ahead of time when we knew or thought the hold was going to be finished. He would come down. Because most ships at that time had six compartments, six cargo holds, and there could have been only two of them full of flax and the rest could be wheat or oats or barley or whatever. So, he would come down and make sure these flax holds were full. That's all he was mainly concerned about.

EE: The six holds would be from side to side in a row, or were there two side by side?

TM: No, they were six in a row fore to aft.

EE: Was there any method to the order in which they were filled?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EE: What kind of order would it--?

TM: Well, it depended on the ship. Every ship is different because some ships had a wheelhouse and accommodation forward and aft. So, maybe you'd have to fill from Number 1 hold to Number 5 hold right up or something on one with everything, all the accommodation, in the after end. Whereas with accommodation on both ends, you might leave Number 1 hold and Number 6 hold slack and the middle of the ship would be full—the 2, 3, 4, and 5 hold would all be full. Yeah.

EE: Right. Who gave you the orders on that?

TM: The chief officer.

EE: Of the ship?

TM: We worked under his direction. But they changed crews a lot, so we had a pretty good knowledge of each ship after years. You know how the ship's going to load, and we could help a lot of the first officers as far as loading was going.

EE: It would become a question, I suppose. "You'd like the ship loaded this way?" His confirmation, and then you'd go and do it.

TM: Yeah, exactly, yeah. But he was the boss in the end. We had to load--. [...*audio skips*]

EE: It would be the order in which they were loaded, I suppose. The extent to which each hold was loaded.

TM: Yeah, and some of the chief officers were a little difficult at times. You'd try to help them out, and they'd think you're trying to overrule them, trying to do their job or something. They wouldn't get along with you too good. But most of them were good. Most ships you would fill Number 2 hold and Number 5 hold right away, there's no problem because you know they're going to fill.

EE: Tie it down. [Laughs]

TM: Yeah. Then again, as the ship got older, some of the bulkheads were pretty crappy. They would get a big bulge in them, and you were wondering if they were going to stand up. Okay. Once in a while a bulkhead would break too.

EE: Yes, because you're filling a hold, the next one is empty, and so it can bulge into--.

TM: Yeah, exactly, and that did happen once in a while too. Actually, once one ship broke in half too when they were unloading it because they had done the same thing down in Montreal. They had loaded a hold--. [...*audio skips*] Right at the dock, yeah.  
[Laughing]

EE: Little excitement at that point.

TM: Yeah, that's right! Yeah, somebody had to explain that.

EE: How full would the holds be when you—the fullest holds—that you--?

TM: They'd be right to the top.

EE: Right to the top?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EE: How much clearance? A few inches?

TM: Not--.

EE: Or preferably--.

TM: Oh, no, they'd be packed. And again, some of the chief officers, they were more particular than others too, whereas some would say, "That's enough there," and you'd leave it down a few inches. But the hatches, they had steel beams across them, so some of them if you filled them too full, they couldn't get the hatches on. So, they'd take the hatches off and you'd have to shovel some of the grain out of the way, or shovel it into the next hold, or they had a booby hatch to get down into the cargo hold for the crew--. [...*audio skips*]

[0:25:32]

Hatch, so we'd have to take some of the grain out of the hatch and put it into the booby hatch so that they would have room to put the hatches on. Yeah. That happened quite often in my early days there anyways. Some of the old ships, they had hatches that slid from side to side, from the side of the ship to the middle. They would push the grain all into the middle and you might have a stack of grain in the middle of the hatch. So, you'd have to end up shovelling that out, and some of the mates would want them full. They'd come back every trip, they'd come back 20 times a year and still do the same thing, make you shovel this grain all the time. I don't know whether to show you they were boss or what it was. But most of them were good, yeah.

EE: Yeah. If you filled a hold to that extent--. [...*audio skips*]

TM: Oh, yeah. Like as far as trimming it, you mean? Levelling it off?

EE: Yes, yes.

TM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We were in there with the spout running, with the grain running out of the spout, and we're there shovelling it all that or using the plow or whatever. Yeah. Because sometimes we would just get the grain in high enough in the hatch. So, you'd get the plow, and we'd just throw the plow on top of the grain to direct it. Because coming down the spout, say, from 90 feet up or something, it had quite a force and you could shoot some that grain--. Some of the spouts would shoot 20 to 25 feet.

EE: And everything nature will do, gravity will do for you. You want to take advantage of it for sure.

TM: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Was it dangerous in any way? Flax could be tricky.

TM: Yeah, yeah, but other than that--. Years ago, when we used to load the screenings, they were really bad. Now, I don't know. I'm glad I'm out of the business now, but in the last few years they started shipping peas and they are the dirtiest commodity. I think they were worse than screenings. Really dusty, and you had to wear a mask and that, of course, or you wouldn't be able to breathe.

EE: Did you always wear masks from the beginning?

TM: No, no.

EE: [Laughs] When did you--?

TM: I hardly—myself personally—I hardly ever wore them. I didn't like wearing them. The main reason I didn't like wearing them, they used to fog up my glasses. If I wore a mask, I would get steam in here and my glass would fog up. But a lot of the guys wore masks all the time. Some of them were more sensitive. A couple of the fellows had sort of asthma and that, but they used to wear a mask.

EE: I was thinking that if you're not wearing a mask and breathing in that dust, the lungs must begin to feel it after a while.

TM: Yeah, it was awful stuff. Canada Malting—they make malt for brewery and whatever—and I don't know what they put in their barley after it's processed. They germinate it and it dries out. I don't know what they're using, but--. As it turned out, I was foreman at that elevator for quite a few years when I was on the waterfront, and my eyes, you couldn't see for a couple of days. It would just be beet red. I don't know what it was in their commodity, but it just burned my eyes. Well, it did everybody. A lot of the guys wouldn't even go there, wouldn't work there. But we never said anything about it because it was our job, but we certainly didn't like doing it.

EE: Had there been health problems for grain trimmers? Any kind of pattern of them?

TM: Not really. Not that I can think of, no.

EE: Life expectancy has been okay?

TM: Well, I don't know. A lot of them it seems as soon as they retire, they die off. Well, my father he lived four years after, then died. It seemed to me at that time, say 25 years ago, a lot of the fellows after they retired, it seemed they only lived a year or two after. But now, a lot of the guys are living 15 or 20 years after. So, there doesn't seem to be--.

**[0:30:02]**

EE: I'm very pleased to hear that, although the other experience you're suggesting from the earlier years would probably be a result of the work being done.

TM: I would guess so, yeah. Yeah. Because you were more, I don't know, in touch with or right in the cargo holds and that. There was a lot of package freighters, and they were awful. When the Seaway first opened, we got a lot of oil tankers here for hauling grain out of here. They were awful. Lots of them carried oats at times, and oats was another bad commodity as far as I'm concerned. I know I didn't like oats. That was the worst one I ever ran across as far as loading.

EE: So, oats is your--. I would think of barley as worse, although you mentioned of course the malting barley at Canada Malting.

TM: Yeah, yeah. But no, I found oats was the worst thing because it's a finer dust, I think, whereas barley is maybe a little more itchy. You get more itch off the barley dust, but the oats it seemed to be a finer dust. On these tankers, sometimes we would have 30 guys on a tanker loading tankers because there was numerous—I don't know how many—hatches they would have, just little hatches. Some of them were only big enough for an oil pipe, but we're filling all of these. We were down in the cargo hold—I guess it would be a cargo hold, a tank, or it would probably called a tank on the oil tankers—but they were really bad. It took you days to load some of those tankers. Really slow.

EE: And they were determined to send them back down the lakes with a grain cargo?

TM: Yeah! I don't understand how they got them cleaned up. At that time, I don't know, it didn't phase me at the time, but now I often wonder how they ever got all that junk out of there to put grain in there after hauling oil.

EE: Because you'd been in a tanker when it was ready to load, you were in the hull, and it seemed clean enough to take grain.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, there was nothing sticky.

EE: They must have washed it out. You hate to think of what the washing area was like on the waterfront where they cleaned those tankers.

TM: Exactly! How much pollution is going into Lake Superior when they do clean these?

EE: A lot.

TM: Yeah. For a few years too, there was a lot of bulk carriers, like salties, would come here after bringing sugar or something into Toronto or Hamilton or somewhere, and the holds in there were really stinky and that too, and sticky. Oh! Like molasses almost,



but they got them cleaned up. They used to run here fairly regular, those ships, after unloading their cargo in Toronto or something, come here for grain.

EE: The cargo would have been brought up in liquid or whatever form, viscous form, like petroleum. Like oil.

TM: Well, yeah.

EE: They just filled the thing and then unloaded it, washed it out, and then it direct came up here in ballast, I suppose.

TM: Well, some of the sugar was just raw sugar too. Yeah, yeah.

EE: But it would have been in the hold not in bags or anything or that sort, simply--.

TM: No, no, just bulk sugar. Yeah.

EE: Bulk sugar?

TM: Yeah, yeah. Sticky and that. I don't know how--. It's beyond me how they loaded that stuff on and got away with it because now with some of these ships, they have to be as clean as this kitchen floor. Like Canada Malt, if they send a shipment to—they send quite a bit to Africa, their malt barley—they clean the hull right out. It's got to be spotless. They line the whole cargo hold with plastic vapour barrier before they load it. They're that fussy about it, whereas years ago they would never load it into some of those ships. Yeah, yeah.

EE: You developed quite a knowledge of shipping, of ships doing this job? [Laughs]

TM: Oh, yeah! Yeah, it was--.

EE: You've been in them all.

TM: Hm?

EE: You've been in all the different kinds of ships that were used for moving grain.

TM: Yeah. Some of the most--. Like when the Seaway first opened, a lot of the liberty ships came here. They were leftover from the war.

EE: The old transport vessels.

TM: Yeah. They would come here, and they would go up the Kam River and load and take flour over to Africa or somewhere. If we weren't loading grain or something at the time, we would go and load flour at night or something. Like if I was trimming, I'd load grain for 8 or 10 hours and then go over there and load bags of flour during the nights. We'd work and they'd work all night. So, sometimes I'd go two or three days without any sleep. Not only myself, a lot of the guys done that. It's just to make some money. [Laughs] It was fairly good money at that time for loading these ships because it was overtime. We'd always go there because they'd have a crew loading during the day loading, and then they'd have to get another gang in at night. So, we would go there, and we would get the overtime. [Laughing]

**[0:35:30]**

EE: And you were all trimmers?

TM: Yeah, yeah. Most. Trimmers or longshoremen.

EE: The daytime people were in the union as well?

TM: Yeah. They were the longshoremen. The grain trimmers and other longshoremen would go. Like I say, sometimes we had 200-250 men working. From our office, we would do all the dispatching for both locals for as far as the grain and the longshoremen. We still do that. I don't say we. The trimmers still do that. [Laughs] Yeah, because I was president and general manager of the company for 19 years, I think.

EE: So, that makes it, what, about '84 to '03?

TM: '76 I got--.

EE: '76 to--.

TM: '76 I went in the office until I finally got fed up with it and got back on the waterfront just before I retired. [Laughing] Just thought I'd try it for a couple more years, and what a difference!

EE: It was a pleasure to be working with all the equipment now, I suppose?

TM: It really was. Yeah, I enjoyed the last few years again, because, like I say, everything was changed so much even in that time I was in the office because everything was pushbutton. You'd just go there, grab a box, and push a few buttons and move the spout around.

EE: Remote control, eh?

TM: Yeah, exactly. It sure made it a big--. [...*audio skips*]

EE: At the Lakehead, I don't suppose. This was flour produced--.

TM: No, it came from Robin Hood. They had a storage shed just down the Kam River from Paterson Elevator on the other side of the river. Occasionally, they would send a ship there. But most of the ships there were Canadian, whereas at Shed 7 down by Westland D Elevator, which is no longer there—the International Harvester building there, just up past there—that's where they would send the salties for flour for shipment overseas. Whereas from Robin Hood across from Paterson there, that was all for Georgian Bay or somewhere in Toronto. That flour, that was just for Canadian consumption.

EE: But it had been ground in Winnipeg or--.

TM: Yeah, somewhere out west.

EE: Or Keewatin, perhaps Lake of the Woods Milling.

TM: Exactly, yeah.

EE: Which was what? Was it Red Rose there for a time? Well, other details.

TM: I'm not sure. I'm not sure, yeah.

EE: I was thinking about flour milling and saying to myself, “There was never any significant flour milling done here at the Lakehead.” The business which avoided the Welland Canal was, as you were saying earlier, very significant. Grain was shipped from here to, what, Depot Harbour, the once-upon-a-time near Parry Sound. But then of course there were the other places. Port McNicoll was the--?

TM: Yeah, and Midland.

EE: And Midland area and so on.

TM: Owen Sound.

EE: Collingwood and Owen Sound, perhaps.

TM: Yeah, yeah.

EE: I mean, there are elevators still to be seen in both Collingwood and Owen Sound.

TM: Yeah, and there’s a few of them down--.

EE: I was enjoying them last summer.

TM: Around the Welland Canal before you get to the--.

EE: Yes, that’s right. In fact, one of the flour mills built in the first years of the century was at the Welland Canal mouth, as I remember.

TM: I’m not sure.

EE: I’ve done research on the flour milling industry 100 years ago, so some of these things stick in my memory.

TM: I don’t know. I’m trying to think of some places. Well, they would take some of--. [...*audio skips*] And rapeseed and that goes now to Windsor for oilseeds.

EE: For processing down there, right.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Thorold, there was an elevator in Thorold, Ontario. It used to go there pretty regular. There's one elevator at Port Colborne, which is like a transfer elevator, I guess.

EE: Yeah, Port Colborne, in fact, was where the elevator was built—or the flour mill—was put up at that time.

TM: Okay, yeah.

EE: So, back to the office. You went into the office you said in 1976?

TM: '76, yeah.

EE: '76. As the president of the local?

TM: Yeah, of the company. Yeah, it was the company. When the Seaway opened, we formed a company, a limited company. We had to because when the salties started coming here, we started working for stevedoring contractors in Montreal. So, because of liability insurance et cetera at that time, so in 1959 we formed a company. We changed the name from Fort William and Port Arthur Grain Trimmers to Thunder Bay Grain Trimmers Limited, and we formed a limited company at that time. Yeah.

**[0:40:30]**

EE: So, you were a company in dealing with the organization in Montreal?

TM: Yeah.

EE: And your members were also members of a union, negotiating--.

TM: Yes, some of them were, not all of them. Not all because every elevator we had one foreman, and he was not in the company. Or sorry, he was not in the union.

EE: Right, he'd be--.

TM: He'd be the company boss or company rep, whatever you call him. Yeah, yeah.

EE: That must have been a fine art, the incorporated company employing the foremen. Then the members, the guys doing the work, they'd all been grain trimmers previously were now--.

TM: Kind of unique, yeah, yeah.

EE: But the union didn't negotiate with the company?

TM: Yeah.

EE: Or did it?

TM: Yes, yeah.

EE: Okay, so the company rather than the union now began dealing with the--. [...*audio skips*] You'd be paid.

TM: Yeah, yeah, that's right. Essentially, you would say that, yeah.

EE: So, I get the sense that you weren't getting rich doing this. The negotiations--. On the other hand, there was never a stoppage. You never went on strike.

TM: No, never. No. We always got along with them, yeah. We found them fair to deal with as far as that goes, yeah. Yeah.

EE: So, you were, of course, compared to the ship and the investment in the ship, you were--. How many men would be loading? How many trimmers would there be on a ship as a rule? Proportional to the size, I suppose.

TM: Well, again--. Yeah, and the elevator.

EE: And the elevator?

TM: The elevator had a bearing on it. Like you go to P&H [Parrish & Heimbecker] or Canada Malt, they had one spout. So, you maybe need four or five guys if there's not too much trimming, depending on the ship again too. Yeah. You go to Pool 7 or, years

ago, Pool 4 before it was demolished or shut down whatever, they had seven spouts. So, we might have had 20 guy--. [...*audio skips*] Five guys maybe.

EE: So, it's sort of maybe a very rough ratio. Maybe in the big elevators, three per spout would be sort of the ratio or something like that? Whereas if it was single--.

TM: Yeah, three or four.

EE: You'd have four or five to make sure you had enough.

TM: Yeah, because you had one guy--. There's a couple elevators everything is completely automatic, like Richardson. They control the spout up and down, in and out, and sideways, and they control the flow of grain out of it too with a button. Whereas most of the other elevators, they control the flow of the grain with ropes. They shut them off with--. So, you'd need another guy there to control these shipping lines, we'd call them. There'd be one guy running the spout up and down, and then some of them don't have the spout going sideways, so you'd have one trimmer on each side of the spout directing the spout from one side of the hatch to the other to get it full. So, it had a bearing on the elevator--. [...*audio skips*]

Ago when the Seaway first started, after that there was a lot of ships, these salties, had to be trimmed with the machine. We would lower a machine into the cargo hold and put the grain spout right into this trimming machine. They would shoot the grain, say--. The trimming machine it stood about eight feet high, and it had an endless belt on it, a short belt, that would throw the grain. Well, it would throw the grain up into the corner of the hold 30 or 40 feet to get that compartment full. So, you would just spray this grain around with the machine, the trimming machine. But eventually, they done away with them because all of the ships now are bulk carriers. The hatches are pretty well wide open. They may need a little trimming, or you may have to use the plow to get some of the compartments full. It just--. [...*audio skips*] What it is. Yeah. Again, some of the ships are built now, the cargo holds have a sloped side, whereas others they go right flat in just like a ceiling. So, the hatch is here in the middle, you've got to get these corners full. Yeah.

EE: Who produced the machine that you were mentioning?

**[0:45:05]**

TM: Well, they came from Montreal originally. Yeah, and we bought them. We had half a dozen at one time, but I don't think they've used one for years now.

EE: There's probably one or two of them sitting around in a junkyard or--.

TM: Yeah, they're probably at the Keefer I would say because Lakehead Shipping have an office there and I think--.

EE: Sure, Bill Hryb?

TM: Right, exactly, yeah, and Canadian Grain Trimmers. I don't know who's the manager there now. John Kemp was manager there. [Inaudible] or somebody is there now. Yeah.

EE: When we build the museum, we'll want one of those!

TM: Yeah! [Laughing] Get a plow and--.

EE: A wooden shovel!

TM: A wooden shovel, yeah. [Laughing] Those are hard to get those wooden shovels.

EE: I bet they're not given away lightly.

TM: No, that's for sure. I don't know.

EE: A beautiful artifact.

TM: Yeah, I don't know. There'd be a few around still. Not too many though.

EE: So, the organization, as president, what kind of assistance did you have in the office?

TM: I just had a secretary.

EE: A secretary.

TM: Yeah, a bookkeeper and such.



EE: The one woman in the organization?

TM: Yeah, exactly. Well, actually we had a man.

EE: Or did you have a man? [Laughs]

TM: Actually, when I started there, he was a stout member of St. Paul's Church. Well, you know Lorraine Marrier?

EE: Oh, yes.

TM: His father.

EE: Oh, his father?

TM: Ambrose was the bookkeeper there for years.

EE: And secretary and so on.

TM: Yeah, he was there when I started, Lorraine's father. Yeah. There was a couple of other trimmers who were--. [...*audio skips*]

EE: I guess it would be.

TM: Yeah, yeah. They were trimmers. I don't know. El, as far as I was concerned, was the best Christian I ever met. [Laughs]

EE: One of God's saints for sure. No question about it.

TM: Oh, yeah. He really was, wasn't he?

EE: Oh, yeah. Splendid. An elder. When the elders were gone, El was still at work. [Laughing]

TM: Yeah, that's right.

EE: Very impressive that.

TM: Yeah, but no, I enjoyed my time in the office there. But after 19 years of--.

EE: But there comes a time when you want to be out in the fresh air again. [Laughing]

TM: Yeah! Exactly. Like I say, I was getting ready to retire. It wasn't as hectic as--. I can't remember what year it was. We shipped a lot of grain some years, and we would load 60-65 ships every two weeks, eh? That was a lot of grain, a lot of ship movement. Whereas now, something might get 10 or 12 ships every two weeks. One a day if they're lucky sometimes.

EE: One could weep over the decline in the grain trade.

TM: Oh, it's awful! It really--. [...*audio skips*]

EE: What would you say about the esprit de corps? I'm thinking there wasn't a lot of glamour about it, but men can be proud of what they're doing. Was there that kind of feeling in the local?

TM: Well, yeah. I don't know, I think we were well-respected and thought of by the elevators. We got along really good because we had to go to every different elevator, and you're dealing with a different foreman and different superintendent. Then you go on the ship, and you get different kinds of people running the ships. Like the chief officers who we dealt with mostly, and occasionally you would get a captain in there that would want to have his say too, so we had to deal with him too. We seemed to get along with everybody. We never had any hard feelings I don't think. As far as I know anyway.

EE: This suggests a combination of abilities. Obviously, knowledge of ships, the skill and all of the muscle work that went into--. [...*audio skips*] Ability to work with them.

TM: Yeah, yeah. I don't know what to say, but--.

EE: Was there a social life to the organization?

TM: Not really. In the early years, there was. We'd always go to the Waverly Hotel or the Alexander in Westfort and drink their beer or something. [Laughs]

EE: Yeah. There was a watering hole, the Waverly on Port Arthur, where the guys would meet?

TM: Yeah, yeah. It was a bit of a problem years ago in the early years when I first started trimming. It really annoyed me as far as their drinking and that. I can't believe to this day that nobody was ever injured because--. Not only us, but the ship's crews too sometimes. Some of our guys would get mixed up with a mate or some of the crew and that and have a good time, and you wonder why nobody--. [...*audio skips*] He was a real Christian. He wouldn't have a drink to save his soul, and he got killed on the job. He fell down the cargo hold and got killed. That's the only fellow I know that was ever injured on the job as far as--.

**[0:50:29]**

EE: Cold sober and dead?

TM: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Tragic.

TM: Yeah. Actually, his daughter—again a member of St. Paul's church—Jean Chisamore.

EE: Oh, yes. I've heard the name many times.

TM: Yeah, she was really involved in the church. I don't know. Things were--.

EE: We've heard a fair amount about alcohol by now, [laughs] so if you were to tell us that a lot of the guys went in with bottles in their back pockets, we wouldn't be surprised.

TM: At that time--.

EE: Or did they not?

TM: They didn't. Years ago, but after I got in the office—I don't know whether I can be proud or not—but I certainly--. [...*audio skips*] Them, I don't know if anybody ever has a drink on the waterfront now. I know the elevators themselves have cut back. You can't dare have a drink or something.

EE: But there was a--? In those earlier decades.

TM: Oh, it was a problem. It was a problem, for sure. Definitely, yeah. But not now, like I say.

EE: No, no. It's the earlier years we're thinking of. It appears to have been pretty general in a lot of workplaces and so the grain trimmers weren't immune from that temptation.

TM: Oh, no. It was a real problem years ago. Like in the '40s and that, I remember my father—not only him—but I mean they'd have their beer and that. It used to annoy me. I would never have a drink myself. Well, maybe one a year or something. It just bothered me to all end that these guys were drinking and that.

EE: And this was on the job too?

TM: Yeah, yes, and after.

EE: And afterwards.

TM: The elevators used to shut down at 5:00 for an hour and a half for supper--. [...*audio skips*] And it was a problem. After the elevators went on shift work and that, so they carried it right on through. So, then that kind of done away with all this crap anyway as far as I was concerned. But I really laid down the law when I was in the office, [laughs] and I took over as president of the company. Told them, "There's no drinking on the job or you're gone."

EE: The members respected that to the best of your knowledge?

TM: Yeah. Exactly, yeah. Like I say, right now it's not a problem, but it was public knowledge, I think, that the trimmers were a bunch of bad actors at one time. [Laughing]

EE: Well, they had a lot of company from what we've heard from other workplaces, so you don't have to feel exposed!

TM: Yeah, the elevators guys too, and the shipping guys.

EE: Port Arthur Shipyard? [Laughing]

TM: Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I didn't have much to do with the shipyard.

EE: We've had an interview or two--.

TM: Oh, is that right?

EE: [Laughing] So, I think we can assure you that there was an awful lot of it. But generally speaking, despite that, it was a safe place? Well, you mentioned there was this one gentlemen who had--.

TM: Yeah, that's the only tragedy I remember there, yeah.

EE: So, you had to be careful around a ship. There's lots of ways of getting hurt or killed around a ship, I would imagine.

TM: Yeah, exactly. It just amazes me all these years that nobody really did get hurt there. There was a few accidents, nothing really major though because you take--. Like even in the fall years ago when navigation closed on December the 12th, the ship had to leave the dock by midnight. Well, what they done—I remember a couple of times—on the 12th of December at midnight, the ship, the crew would come out and take the lines off the dock and throw them on the ship. The ship wasn't tied to the dock anymore and we were still loading the ship. So, he was still covered with the--. [...*audio skips*] And the ice would hold the ship against the dock or something otherwise.

EE: Because there was ice already formed?

TM: Oh, yeah. Most times there would be ice. Yeah, yeah.

EE: So, they managed to stretch that season into Christmas, New Year's, into January for some winters, haven't they, recently?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EE: Pressed it out late.

TM: Pretty general now to run into January a couple of days. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Well, what would you like people to know about the work that you did, Tom? What you've been describing in very interesting detail, I must say, it's really given us a great picture.

TM: I don't know. [Laughs] All I can say is I enjoyed my time trimming. I wish I was still there! [Laughs]

EE: It was an important job to be doing?

TM: Yeah, I felt we accomplished something, yeah, as far as our getting along with the elevators and shipping crew. We had to get along with different people—the government inspectors and that—we'd have to get along with everybody. I think we generally did.

**[0:55:29]**

EE: Did the government inspectors have anything to do with the ship?

TM: Oh, yeah. They had to pass the ship for the cleanliness.

EE: Okay, at the beginning?

TM: Yeah.

EE: Or before loading.

TM: They would send an inspector up on the ship. He would check and make sure the cargo holds were dry. They would always have to write a report before we started loading, and they would write on the report, "ECD: Empty, clean, and dry," [laughs] before we started loading. Occasionally there was a few different ships they might--. There was a couple of ships I remember in particular that had a small cargo hold, and they would carry ballast in it. So, some of these grain inspectors were pretty fussy and they would say, "Well, you can't start loading. You've got to have a certificate to start loading with this ballast in there." But in the end, they came around and things worked out fine. Yeah.

EE: What did the ships usually use for ballast?

TM: Just water.

EE: Filled with water?

TM: Yeah, yeah. I don't know, bringing some of this stuff into the lakes now, it bothers me.

EE: Sure. Zebra mussels and other things come in that way, haven't they?

TM: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, yeah.

EE: What might interest or surprise people most about the work that you did?

TM: [Laughs] Oh.

EE: The fact that it wasn't sweaty or hot surprises me because I've been in granaries—I've been levelling grain in granaries in my youth—where it was sticky and hot.

TM: Well, it can be in the summer, of course, and then in the winter. You're loading in all kinds of weather conditions. And there again, at one time, it was up to the grain inspector to say whether you could load in different weather. If it was snowing or raining or something, they could come out and stop the loading. They tried to push the buck onto somebody else and say, "Well, it's up to the captain. If he wants to load in this, he's responsible for the cargo." So, we never really knew where we stood as far as loading in bad weather, which is very common. Especially on a saltie, if they would-- [Coughs] Excuse me. If they were loading in-- If a snowflake come down or something, they would immediately shut off, and they would just freak out sometimes some of these captains. If a snowflake came along, they would want to close the hatch up when the spout is still running! They wouldn't even let you get the spout onto the latch. They were just crazy some of them. It just drove you nuts, eh?

EE: Men out of the tropics, I suppose.

TM: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Even some of the lakers, they would want to stop loading, but even some of the captains I don't think knew—or the chief mates knew—where they stood as far as whose responsibility it is to stop the loading. Whereas some elevators, like Canada Malt, were very fussy. I must say that about them because their cargo was so valuable. It was bone dry, so they couldn't have any moisture at all in it. They always kept a good eye on the weather. They were very sure of what they were doing there. But some of these other elevators, they would get mad if you shut off the loading or something. Yeah, but it all worked out in the end.

EE: And of course, the elevator people—just lumping them all together—are interested in getting as much grain as they can out of their silos or whatever into the ship as fast as they can.

TM: As fast as they can. That's right.

EE: So, anyone gets in the way of that stuff moving through, they're going to be somewhat unhappy.

TM: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, yeah. Like the ships too, they'd like to get going, so they'd like to complete the loading if they could.

EE: That's true.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Because they're—even more so now than they were years ago—some of them are pretty lenient. They wouldn't care if they spend another night in town or something. Whereas now I guess they're really under the gun to get going. Keep going all the time, that's--. Where a lot of the elevators now are working 24 hours a day, whereas years ago they wouldn't work past midnight. There was no way they would work past midnight, but now that's fairly common for them to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**[1:00:12]**

EE: Do you have a knowledge of priorities at the docks? Someone has suggested to us that the domestic ships got in immediately and the salties tended to have to wait a day or two, from his observations. What do you know about that?

TM: Well, some of these salties are chartered too, eh? Well, they're all chartered, and some are on a time charter and some of them are on a voyage charter. Like if somebody charters them, "Well, you go to Thunder Bay and get a load of flax or whatever on October the 14th." Well, if the ship arrives here on October the 12th or October the 10th, he might have to sit in the harbour for three or four days. The cargo may not be here. That happens quite often. Very. A lot of times, they'll even start loading a ship when the cargo is not all here. In general, they have to go to two or three elevators. It's very uncommon if they don't go to three elevators for a load to get their cargo. So, if say two thirds of the cargo is here, he might load for a couple of days and then go out to anchor waiting for the rest of the cargo to come in at the other elevator. Yeah. That's very common.

EE: I suppose it would be unfortunate if he arrived late.

TM: Yeah.



EE: So, they'd sooner arrive early than to be late?

TM: Yeah, yeah. Like I say, if he's on a time charter, he's got to be here on the 14th of October or something. If he doesn't show up, like I say, they can probably assess him a fine or something.

EE: Yes, I daresay.

TM: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Whereas the domestic vessels or whatever we want to call them—ones that are running grain--.

TM: The lakers, yeah.

EE: Lakers, yes, as against the salties, right. The lakers would--. Did you have a sense of--? Who were they working for in terms of the contracts for the grain movement? Because obviously the terminal elevators belong to Sask Pool or Richardson's or whomever. They're working under the Wheat Board, which has acquired the grain, hasn't it, from the farmers?

TM: Mmhmm.

EE: So, do you have a sense of who's it is?

TM: No, I never worried about that part of it, Ernie. [Laughing]

EE: You just saw the stuff.

TM: I don't know. You get some these ships agents and that on the salties, and you don't know who they're working for, like Willy Hryb. So, I really don't know, and that really didn't bother me. I didn't get into that end of the business too much. Yeah, so.

EE: You were involved in making sure the stuff moved and got into the holds properly.

TM: We just wanted to get the ships in here, get them loaded, and get them out. That was our main concern. We just tried to provide a good service, which I think we did and still do as far as I know. Yeah.

EE: Are there any surprises at all of this, you think, for people who have--? I don't know whether you've served up some surprises for us this afternoon. I think there has been a surprise or two in here, but anything else come to mind?

TM: No, I can't think of it. When you go out the door, I'll probably think of something. [Laughing]

EE: Well, give us a telephone call! [Laughing]

TM: No, I can't think of anything else.

EE: What are you most proud of about the work that you did overall over those 52 years?

TM: Hm. I don't know. I think we improved our service and our--. I don't know. I don't know how to word it as far as saying we made a better--. We'd done a better job, are doing a better job, than when I started. I'm not taking credit for this myself, by any means.

EE: We'll talk about changes in a few moments because there's interesting stuff in there in terms of how it's developed.

TM: Yeah. I don't know how to word it.

EE: I suppose if I was to ask you sort of a parallel question, do you think that the work you did contributed to Canada's success as an international grain trader? I daresay the answer would be yes. [Laughing]

TM: Yeah, I think so! Yeah, yeah. I would say so.

EE: You kept the stuff moving!

TM: Yeah, yeah. Like I say, we tried to provide a good service, and I think we do, or we did, or still do, as far as I know. Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I'm kind of at a loss for words right now.

**[1:05:11]**

EE: You've suggested some of the changes already, and let's talk about those a little more. When the work initially developed—wooden shovel in hand—the grain trimmer went to work and moved the grain. There was a time, I suppose, even before spouts were established. There was a time when wheelbarrows were used, but that's going way back.

TM: Yeah, that's right.

EE: By the time you started, of course, the spouts were there, and you mentioned the size of the ships as a factor, the growing width of the ship.

TM: I think probably the biggest change I can see is the new equipment the elevators have installed as far as loading. It's really made it much easier and much quicker of course.

EE: Did Richardson's lead in that on the--. [...*audio skips*]

TM: Paterson was the first one to put the high spout, as far as I can remember. I think they were the first one with the high spout. We call them high spouts, which was a blessing to us because some of those old spouts--. Like, I remember particularly McCabe's Elevator—which is now UGG [United Grain Growers] M, and it's probably it's shut down now too—but they had seven spouts there. They had these little winches on the dock. They were about that big with a little gear on them. Well, it would take you about half an hour or something to crank all these spouts up to get them aboard the ship because the ships were out of ballast, they took the ballast out, and the spouts had to go way up in the air. Now you just push a button, and the spout goes on the ship. That's the biggest improvement I could see over the years that I was there. Yeah.

EE: So, if Paterson led, Richardson's were there. Were the Pool elevator companies slower, then, in making these changes?

TM: A little bit, but--. [...*audio skips*] A year there for a while, but now they're all--. Even P&H, which is a small elevator, and they don't ship very fast. I forget what they ship, about 1,000 tonne an hour or something, but--. Yeah, maybe a little more than that. Yeah, probably 1,000 tonne an hour they ship. But their spout is as good as any of them now, and it's one of the remaining elevators still operating. Because when I started, there was 28 elevators operating in 1950, and now I believe there is only 8 of them operating now, which has made a heck of a difference. I don't think that's going to change. I don't think it's going to improve any, by the look of things anyway.

EE: No, no. It surely will not. Sad to say.

TM: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's too bad.

EE: So, this technological change, you noted the importance of the--. [...*audio skips*] When the package freight business was phased out in the early '70s—I believe that's when it happened—CSL stopped doing that business. The ships were gone I suppose.

TM: Once the Keefer opened, they operated a few years after that. But actually, I got a thing here of when the Keefer opened. When was it? 1962.

EE: '62? Yeah.

TM: But CSL were still operating there. They built the--. That Keefer Terminal is essentially for the CSL, I think, because they had loading ramps and that that would accommodate these package freighters. They were newer-type package freighters. They were much bigger than the original package freighters.

EE: It's ironic that it was three years after the Seaway was completed that the terminal was built to handle cargo! [Laughing]

TM: Yeah, yeah! Exactly. [...*audio skips*]

EE: Being ready. Then, of course, from '63 to '71 or 2, which is, I think, about the time that there was a big strike, I understand.

TM: Yeah.

EE: I happened to be down at the Italian Hall, as it happens.

TM: Oh, is that right?

EE: About, well, the early '90s, about 20 years later, a little bit more. It may have been the mid '90s, and Paul Martin was up here to address a Liberal gathering.

TM: Oh, yeah. CSL.

EE: The guys who lost their jobs after that strike when they shut down the package freight business were gathered in the parking lot to demonstrate.

TM: Oh, really? Oh, yeah.

EE: So, an awful lot of bitterness about what CSL--. They were blaming that on Paul Martin now. Oh, yes. "This package made history. It was part of the first package freight cargo to traverse the St. Lawrence Seaway April 1959 in the SS Saskatoon. Canada Steamship Lines. Owned and operated by Canada Steamship Lines package freight business. Lowe Brothers Paints."

**[1:10:19]**

TM: No, I just stuck it on that carboard.

EE: Oh, I see, that's the--.

TM: I took it off one of the packages on that because we loaded grain on that ship after--. [...*audio skips*] There at the right time, yeah.

EE: To grab a souvenir!

TM: Yeah, I ended up loading that ship with grain after. Yeah.

EE: So, you mentioned the trimming machine that you got from Montreal and used for a time, particularly for loading the salties was it?

TM: Yeah, that's all it was for was just for salties. Yeah.

EE: Was that just about—the changes in spouts and then the use of the trimming machine—was that about the extent of mechanization for the trimming work itself?

TM: Yeah, I would say so. Yeah. Yeah, there wasn't much else you could change.

EE: Well, I guess when a hull is completely open, when the neck just opens, then you can fill it quite easily from side to side. That would be a very significant change as well.

TM: Yeah, see there's one there. There's a hatch there.

EE: Yes, right.

TM: Okay.

EE: This copy of the Canada Sailings, the '07 issue of transportation and trade logistics with an article on the McKinnons, the grain trimmers of Thunder Bay.

TM: [Laughs] Yeah!

EE: Fine picture. "Fifth generation grain trimmers, Mike and--" [...*audio skips*] The picture here of an open hull demonstrates the much greater ease that the trimmers would have in filling that kind of hold.

TM: Oh, yeah.

EE: They should all be like that!

TM: Yeah, really. That's right.

EE: Very interesting.

TM: There's another picture there. That's one of the old lakers years ago, see with the wooden hatches there.

EE: Oh, yes, right.

TM: That was a difficult ship to load too. Actually, that's my father on there too.

EE: Oh, yes. On the front here.

TM: This one here, that's my father.

EE: Oh, that's your father.

TM: Yeah.

EE: Now that does take it back then because he'd be, what, 20-ish at the time?

TM: Uh--.

EE: So, that's early in the century.

TM: No, I would say that was in the '40s. 1940.

EE: Oh, okay.

TM: I would guess that would be in the 1940s.

EE: So, he had a youthful look to him for some time then?

TM: Yeah, yeah. He never had a grey hair on his head until the day he died!

EE: Really?

TM: Yeah! [Laughing]

EE: Yeah, Joe McKinnon. No date.

TM: No, I would--. [...*audio skips*] That ship many times after that, yeah.

EE: The changes that we've described have all made the work easier, the loading of a ship much more efficient?

TM: Yeah.

EE: You've suggested very long--. It could take 10 or 12 hours to load some ships.

TM: Oh, yeah, at least.

EE: Or longer than that?

TM: Most of the ships now that come here, I would say the majority of them carry, what, 30,000 tonnes? Metric tonnes. Most of them would take two days to load, most of them.

EE: At 30,000 tonnes?

TM: Yeah. Whereas at Pool 7A, they could load a ship in 8 or 10 hours. They were about the only elevator that has that output capacity.

EE: Right. They could load a 30,000 tonne--?

TM: In an 8- or 10-hour shift. If they had to, they could. If the grain was available and everything, yeah. But that would be not very common.

EE: So, very often it was a matter of moving from elevator--. [...*audio skips*]

TM: Majority of the time. A majority, yeah. Yeah.

EE: There just wasn't enough cargo at any one place to get--.

TM: Like I say, I don't now what all goes on in the background as far as placing these orders at different elevators and who owns the grain at each elevator. Yeah, that never got into my brain.

EE: You didn't have to worry about the kind of grain, the quality of the grain that--.

TM: No.

EE: Someone else was making those decisions? The stuff comes down the chute, and your task is to distribute it.

TM: Yeah, we deliver it. Yeah, that's right. Exactly.



EE: Besides dealing with--. Obviously, these changes would make the work easier.

TM: Oh, for sure.

EE: And make the movement much faster.

TM: Exactly.

EE: Save money, and--.

TM: That's the biggest part of it, I think, is the speed. It speeded up the loading. Yeah, because years ago when they had to use--. [...*audio skips*] Instead of getting 1,000 tonne an hour, you'd maybe get 100 tonne an hour. So, that makes a big variant in the loading.

**[1:15:05]**

EE: Do you have any kind of sense of what the cost per tonne might be of the trimming work? Or those kinds of calculations were just never made, eh?

TM: No, I couldn't even guess, Ernie. No, no.

EE: Just wondering. Were there any kinds of numbers that you did worry about? Or was it just, "Make sure the job got done."

TM: No, that's all we were concerned with. Yeah. We tried to provide a good service to the ships, yeah, which I think we did. Yeah.

EE: Besides dealing with change, were there challenges that you faced on the job?

TM: No, not really. I think the worst challenge was most of the time was the weather! [Laughs] Yeah, that really bothered you sometimes, especially in the fall if you're out there loading in 40--. [...*audio skips*] I think that's still a problem, I would say.

EE: How much of the time loading a ship would you be on deck, as against being down in the hull or down in the hold? Or were you most--?

TM: 90 percent you'd be—oh, at least 90 percent now—yeah. There's very little that you go down in the hold anymore. Most of the--.

EE: There used to be more?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EE: There was a time when you'd be down in the hold--?

TM: Half the time.

EE: Half the time?

TM: Half the day or something you could be down there, yeah.

EE: Yeah. Yeah, that's a very good question. How did one actually become a grain trimmer? Who did the work? Who were all of you?

TM: Well, friends, relatives. It was kind of family affair for years, in previous years, but not so anymore.

EE: And what family was it? [...*audio skips*]

TM: Ended up I hired you, well maybe a couple years later you would want your son to come and grain trim or something. Well, we would work them in part time and that, and eventually he would end up being a trimmer. But it's not as family oriented as it used to be.

EE: No, we're thinking of the earlier--. The development of it. You mentioned a number of them being at St. Paul's United, good Presbyterian church that it was--.

TM: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah.

EE: In years past. You weren't all Irish and Scots Presbyterians I don't--?

TM: There was a lot of Scotch.

EE: There was a lot of Scots?

TM: Yeah. At the elevators too. Like UGG, there was pretty well all Scotchmen worked there as it turned out. But no, actually my grandfather's father-in-law, they were German descent. They were the Heyders.

EE: Oh, yes. H-E-Y-D-E-R?

TM: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Jim Heyder is a connection?

TM: Too far from me.

EE: He has also been in spiritual care at the hospital. I know Jim, so I was wondering.

TM: Oh, no, I don't know. It doesn't sound familiar to me. But no, just the luck of the draw if you wanted to be a grain trimmer. You might start out working at the Keefer or something nowadays, but there's not as much work at the Keefer now as there was years ago either.

EE: That's the problem with so much of the waterfront is there's so much less than there used to be.

TM: Yeah, but--.

EE: Were there Ukrainians or Italians in the grain trimmers?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EE: It wasn't all Anglo-Celtic or--.

TM: No, no, no, no. Not by any means. No, no, no. But there was a lot of like my family. There was ended up five--. My uncle worked, and my grandfather's two brothers were trimmers and that at one time. But not anymore. When the Keefer first--. [...*audio skips*] And that because some of them were kind of part-time farmers and they would come in and work in the city here. In the winter they didn't have anything to do so they'd go back out there, but now there's quite a few of them, the regular trimmers, from the outskirts. So, there's not really a connection to any particular family and such. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Well, major challenges faced over the years? Did changes in the industry impact you, other than the root fact of, "If there's a lot of grain moving, you have a lot of work to do, and if there's not much grain, there's less work." Have other changes impacted--?

TM: No, that's--. Not really. The only changes are just mechanical, there's an aspect of it. I think that has really made a big change as far as--. [...*audio skips*]

**[1:20:19]**

EE: Faster and so on.

TM: More enticing to be a grain trimmer now. [Laughing] Yeah.

EE: Well, I'm curious. I got the sense early in this narration of yours that your father wasn't particularly pushing you towards it.

TM: Not at all. No. Like I say, when I went to high school I didn't know where I was going to end up. I kind of knew for sure that I wasn't going to be going to university because of our financial situation because, like I say, there was eight of us in our family and I was the second oldest. So, I knew I wasn't going to--.

EE: I'm the first of eight, so--. [Laughs]

TM: Are you?

EE: But lucky nine years later to get to university.

TM: Oh, really? Okay.

EE: Your younger brothers and sisters they got to the university?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. My young brother Brian—I guess you know Brian—that's my young brother.

EE: Oh, is Brian your--?

TM: Yeah.

EE: Well, we both know Brian. Brian's your brother? I see. What about other brothers then?

TM: Yeah, he's the youngest brother. [...*audio skips*] Might. [Laughing]

EE: Dealing with the Sir John A. Macdonald matter.

TM: Exactly, yeah.

EE: Would I know others of your family?

TM: Well, Donny my other brother was a trimmer. He just retired this year. I have a brother in BC and one in Calgary.

EE: They escaped to the west, did they?

TM: Yeah, and Donny and Brian here, and three sisters, but you wouldn't know them I don't think.

EE: No, that's fine. Well, there are some questions about significant events. What are your most vivid memories other than freezing on the deck? [Laughing]

TM: Oh, God!

EE: Went through and so on, although you might want to expand on that one.

TM: Oh, I don't know. Memories.

EE: You mentioned a few ships, styles of ships, along the way. Are there any particular loading experiences that stand out in your mind?

TM: Yeah, well--. [...*audio skips*] A particular saltie, and it turned out at Canada Malt. It was a double decker, it was a saltie, and we were using machines to trim it. We were loading the 'tween deck before there was any cargo in the lower deck, which was against my wishes at the beginning of that. It had little bulkhead compartments, they called them feeder bins in the 'tween deck. So, you fill these corners, and it would run down into the lower deck after the lower deck was full. But we were loading this one, and we loaded the 'tween deck first. Two holds—it was a five-hold ship—and we loaded Number 2 and 5 hold on the tween decks. It had a bunch of cargo on the deck. It was just scrap wood and that, that they used for dunnage for the general cargo they had brought over from overseas. After we finished loading it, the ship left the dock to go to Richardson Elevator, it turns out again Richardson. But the ship took an awful list, and all this cargo, this dunnage and that, all fell out, went over onto the dock and that. We thought the ship was going to upset right at the dock.

EE: Because it was top heavy?

TM: Yeah, exactly. It scared the daylights out of us.

EE: Were you onboard?

TM: Yeah, yeah!

EE: Oh, I see!

TM: We had a trimming machine on there, and they were fairly heavy. They weigh a couple tonnes because they're all solid steel with a big 50 horse motor on them. But they got the ship upright again. They put ballast back into it to upright it, but I thought for sure that ship was going to sink at the dock! Scared the daylights out of us.

EE: This was a saltie you said?

TM: Yeah.

EE: Where was the captain? The captain obviously didn't know the ship very well, or the chief officer.

TM: Yeah, that's right. I couldn't understand why the port warden would approve something like this to let it load like that. The biggest thing I feel was the safety feature. I thought it was very dangerous because they put these hatch covers on the hold, and they could just break through if you get enough weight on them. They're just wooden hatch covers, yeah, like in that picture there. You see these? They would be just wooden boards covering the lower deck. That was scary. That's about the most frightening thing I think I saw in all the years.

**[1:25:13]**

EE: I certainly understand that. You could watch it with equanimity if you were on the dock, but if you're on the deck it becomes a much more exciting affair! [Laughing]

TM: Exactly, exactly. Yeah, yeah. I can't think of anything else of those that stands out.

EE: Another question—obviously these are sort of kind of fishing questions that we've got in here to see what we can pull out of your memory—what were the most important events that happened in the workplace during your career? Anything to add to what you've told us?

TM: I can't think of anything else, not right at the moment. Like I say, when you walk out the door, I'll think of something I guarantee.

EE: Well, if you think of a lot, we'll be back! [Laughing]

TM: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Do you feel it's important to preserve, to share, Thunder Bay's grain trade history?

TM: Oh, certainly.

EE: Are we doing something good this afternoon?

TM: Yes, I would say so, yeah. Yeah, I really do. Yeah.

EE: And if we could hang onto the artifacts as well.

TM: Yeah.

EE: If we could have saved Pool 6!

TM: Yeah, right! Yeah.

EE: Made that a centre or a museum. Are there any aspects of the history that we should concentrate on preserving to your mind? Obviously, we're beginning to get the grain trimmers here, and we're hoping to talk to one or two more for sure to add additional insights.

TM: I was going to say, yeah, have you talked or are you going to talk to Gene Onchulenko?

EE: We haven't yet. Gene's on our list. Did Gene work in the industry?

TM: Yeah.

EE: He did? Okay, I need to give him a call.

TM: Yeah, I would talk to Gene. He's very knowledgeable.

EE: He is because he's done a lot of research. He's been interested in doing that.

TM: Yeah, and as far as shipping goes, he knows every ship that ever sailed the Great Lakes, I think.

EE: Yes, I bet he does. Well, we'll get to him soon.

TM: And he worked at the elevator previously. He worked at the old Pool 9 elevator, Alberta Pool 9, years ago.

EE: Yes, right. Well, we'll get in touch with him.

TM: Yeah, I would recommend that you talk to him anyway. Yeah.



EE: And you may have an additional thought or two after we finish, but are there any questions that we might have asked that you would love to answer?

TM: No, I can't think of anything. [Laughs] Not right now I can't.

EE: The questionnaire has been working then! Okay, well, there's the question of memorabilia and you've mentioned that there are things that--. You've shown us a few very interesting things, but you have additional things you could dig out if you had the time.

TM: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I just thought of it. Honestly, I've been so busy this week doing nothing.

EE: Well, I've hardly given you any time. You had my call on Monday, I think, and I dropped the letter off on Tuesday, and here it is Friday afternoon. So, it's been mighty tight.

TM: Yeah, yeah. The time just goes. Like I say, I've had several doctor appointments this week. There's no end to it. I don't know.

EE: Well, I trust they're turning out well.

TM: Yeah, so far so good, anyway. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Good, good. Well, I think we might thank you for what you've given us, Tom. This has been terrific. We can talk about other persons in addition to the one or two you've named already after we finish. But thanks very much for introducing us to grain trimming!

TM: Well, I don't know how helpful I've been or--. [Laughs]

EE: Oh, very helpful indeed!

**End of part one.**

## Audio Part Two

Time, Speaker, Narrative

EE: Well, here we are live again with Tom McKinnon to look at the wooden shovel, which his grandfather made, as every grain trimmer had to do or to acquire one. Tom, why don't you describe what you've got in your hands? It's several chunks of wood, actually. So, how would you make one?

TM: Oh, I don't know. It was before my time, Ernie! [Laughing] But most of them were made out of birch, and when they started grain trimming you had to have a shovel to do the work. There was no doubt about it. There was no other way you would get a job if you didn't have a shovel. As you can see, this one has had some damage to it, and they repaired them. My grandfather repaired it with this wire. I don't know.

EE: Because it cracked?

TM: Yeah.

EE: It initially was one chunk of birch?

TM: Yeah, right.

EE: Which shovel shaped, de-handled at the top, it's, what, about--?

TM: About three feet long.

EE: Three feet long from the top of the handle to--. Because the whole thing is probably closer to four feet long, I would think, with the handle and so on. The shovel itself would be a good 15 inches, I would think. Am I right?

TM: Yeah, yeah. Mmhmm. Yeah.

EE: And it broke at some point or other into three pieces. There are two cracks in it on the blade.

TM: Yeah, mmhmm.

EE: But it's been wired together.

TM: Yeah. They carried this. A lot of them at the time, years ago, they would ride the streetcar or the bus to go to work, and they would take the shovel with them.

EE: So, I guess the holes were drilled, and the, is it, copper wire?

TM: Yeah. Well, that's brass wire.

EE: Or is it brass wire was used?

TM: I think a lot of them were copper wire. I've seen several others, and they were copper wire.

EE: I guess there would be some concern too if you had to have metal on it, what kind of metal it would be. I suppose, would brass be less likely to strike a spark?

TM: Probably. I would guess so.

EE: The key thing is of course that the outer edges are wood.

TM: The end, yeah, and the sides. Because if they were shovelling and they happened to hit a metal beam because of the spontaneous combustion, that was the reason they used the wood.

EE: Well, it's a beautiful artifact.

TM: [Laughs] Yeah!

EE: A fine example of what every grain trimmer--. In a sense, this would be the badge of the trade.

TM: Yeah!

EE: A guy got on the streetcar with his wooden shovel, people knew immediately he was a grain trimmer.

TM: Where he was going, yeah. That's right! He was going to load a boat, yeah. That's right.

EE: We didn't really talk about garb particularly. Well, we did actually—coveralls and so and so. Was there anything else other than the shovel that would be essential equipment?

TM: No.

EE: Steel-toed boots, coveralls all the way up, a hat to shade the eyes on a sunny day?

TM: Yeah. A lot of them wore goggles. Like now, loading peas is a real problem.

EE: Dust masks you were mentioning.

TM: Oh, yeah. Like full--. Peas are just a--.

EE: Bad eyes were a real problem because if you didn't have glasses, then you could wear the mask much more easily.

TM: Oh, for sure.

EE: Glasses are a real nuisance!

TM: Yeah, right.

EE: I've experienced them, of course, canvassing in the late fall or winter.

TM: Yeah, right, going in and out.

EE: Knocking at a door, and the door opens and woosh! Out comes the warm air and you're fogged up, instantly fogged up. Okay, well thanks for that addition to the interview, Tom!

TM: Okay.

EE: And I was flipping too--.

**End of interview.**

