

Narrator: Lynda Mitton (LM)

Company Affiliations: Richardson International

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Summary: Lynda Mitton discusses her summer job as a student secretary at Richardson's Elevator with the primary responsibility of recording daily railcar inventories. She describes her familial connection to the elevators through her father and brother, and she details the size and gender make-up of the office staff. Other topics discussed include the collapse of UGG A into the lake, dusty conditions in the elevators, reasons for the grain industry's downturn, and UGG's yearly family picnics.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative
OM: I'll let you know.
EE: Well, thank you so very much, Lynda, for giving us this opportunity to talk about part of your life in the grain trade. In any case, let's start by my asking you to give your name.
LM: I'm Lynda Mitton. I used to be Lynda Vester. There was a whole slew of us in Current River.
EE: Right. Well, we'll get into that. In fact, I ran across the Vester name somewhere the other day. Where was that? And then you can describe perhaps how--. Well, let me see. We want your place and date of birth on the tape as well, so.
LM: I was born in Port Arthur then at the old General Hospital with a twin sister.
EE: Oh, yes, the--.

LM: The youngest of nine.

EE: That's interesting too.

LM: We grew up looking at the elevators.

EE: And the date of birth then in there as well.

LM: Our birthday was April the 2nd. We had to go all the way around to get to April the 1st, so we're the least from being fools.
[Laughing]

EE: And this was in what year then?

LM: Oh, that was 1947.

EE: Right. Well, thank you very much for that information. And so you were living--. You came into Current River, which is a very distinctive community in our city, and the two of you were numbers eight and nine?

LM: We were number eight and nine.

EE: In the family.

LM: Mmhhh. We got spoiled rotten. [Laughing]

EE: You want to tell us something about your family?

LM: Well, we were eight and nine, and we did get spoiled. The others were much older when we were born, so now we do the payback. We look after. Actually, there's only four of us left. But the others, some moved away. Ended up I was the last one at home and nobody else was here. But now I have a brother here. He was a former OPP, but he's retired.

EE: Oh, yes. And your father's name was?

LM: Lloyd Nelson Vester.

EE: Vester.

LM: And he worked at the United Grain Growers [UGG]. He was the master electrician. When we would go out in the car, we would go past the Grain Growers, and lordy lord if there was a light out, we had to drive in, and he had to make sure that light was fixed. So we should just pray that all the lights were on. [Laughs]

EE: So he was meticulous in maintaining the electrical part of the elevator?

LM: Oh, yes. Yes.

EE: He worked there all of his life then, I suppose?

LM: Yes. He died at an early age, 59.

EE: Oh no.

LM: He came home from work, and he was just kind of blue and went up to bed. And my mom called the ambulance, and he went, and the next day he passed away. But while he was working there, he used to have to wear two pairs of overalls because I was a really sickly puny kid. My sister was six pounds, I was three, and I had asthma and pneumonia all the time. So he'd have to wear two pairs of overalls and strip down when he came home. Must have been uncomfortable for him.

EE: Right. Yes, the conditions in the elevators. Well, what got you into the elevator, into the grain trade for a little while?

LM: Well, I always loved the elevators. I thought they were neat to look at. My brother also worked there. He was a millwright. But I remember that explosion. Do you remember that? When the elevator fell into the lake?

EE: I don't. I've heard about it.

LM: It was the Grain Growers where my dad worked.

EE: I see, this was--.

LM: And the tidal wash washed out the sheds that were there. I was really afraid that he'd been in there, but nobody was there. But--.

EE: You were on the brink of a question early on, Owen.

OM: Were you alive at that time?

LM: Oh, yes.

OM: So it would be '53 maybe?

LM: Around there.

OM: Yeah.

LM: Yeah.

EE: So you would have been about 6 years old when it happened.

LM: Yeah. It was--.

EE: This was the one near Port Ship? Near the Shipyard is it?

LM: The shipyard. Mmhmm.

EE: Yes. Right. Because the tidal wave washed into the shipyard as well, I guess, did it?

LM: Yes. It was really something. So thereafter, I was kind of scared that he would get killed at work or something.

EE: Sure. Yes. What did they do with the elevator? Were they able to raise it up again?

[0:05:02]

LM: They did. They did somehow. They rebuilt it. I mean, they had to get all that concrete out of there, but the gases in there were terrible. It was the gases, I guess, that made it explode. [Note: Lynda is mixing up information about the Pool 5 explosion and the UGG collapse into the lake.]

EE: It was actually an explosion, was it, that led to the--.

LM: Mmhmm. It just *pshew!* Blew out the side one bin, one side. Yeah. And when I remember growing up in grade school, in Current River school—that was now Claude Garden School—but in our textbooks, seeing coloured pictures of the elevators at the Lakehead that they used to call us and saying they were the world's biggest, busiest elevators. And I used to be so proud of that, because my father and my brother worked there, you know? So I thought that was great.

EE: Were there a lot of other children who could boast of the same thing? Were there a lot of employees of the grain elevators in Current River?

LM: Yes. Oh, yes. There were. Mmhmm. Yeah. A lot of them used to walk with their lunch. In those days, we had trolley buses, and they didn't go all the way to the Grain Growers. There was a loop they used to turn around at, so a lot of the guys would walk it. I remember that.

EE: Yeah. Would the loop be just short of the Current River?

LM: You know where the baseball diamond is and where the fishery is? Right where that rock cliff is. Right past that there was a big loop where the buses would turn around and go to Fort William, Port Arthur.

EE: Ok. So it's, right, it's just beyond the river then where that diamond is and where this road into Port Ship and the Provincial Mill and so on and so forth.

LM: Yeah.

EE: That's where it did the turnaround. Right. So one spring or into school one year, an interesting opportunity comes you way, I understand?

LM: Yes, yes. I had just finished Grade 10 and thought, “Whew! Summer holidays!” And I got a phone call from the commercial director at Lakeview, and he said, “Lynda, have you got a job for the summer?” And I said, “No, I don’t. I hadn’t planned on looking for one either.” [Laughs] And he said, “Well, how would you like a job at Richardson Elevator?” And I had to stop and think. I said, “Well, I can’t do that, Mr. Westbrook.” He said, “What do you mean you can’t do that?” I said, “Well, I’m too little.” He says, “What do you mean you’re too little?” I said, “Well, I’m only 5’2” and 105 pounds.” And he says, “So what?” I said, “Well, I can’t shovel grain!” [Laughing] He says, “They won’t want you to shovel grain!” He said, “What if I trained you to do?” And I said, “Oh, as secretarial?” He says, “Yes.” And I says, “But there’s no offices in there.” He says, “Yes, there is. They called from there, and they said they wanted a girl. So do you want to go down and take a look and see?” I said, “Okay, but there’s office there.” [Laughs]

So I go and walk down this long pier, all these foxes come out, they’re casing. This long pier, and a big saltie had come in. Oh, the smell of those salties! The fermentation of the wheat on the decks. Oh, it made me nauseous. So it was a really long pier, and then I see a handrail stick out. I look up, and there’s a little tiny office. There’s two windows. So he was right. There was an office there. But you know, just recently I talked to somebody—in fact one of the fellows who worked in the office with me—and I asked him about that. I said, “I don’t remember there being offices in the Grain Grower and that.” He said, “Most of the other elevators had their offices downtown in buildings.” So I had a reason to doubt. But I went, I took the job, and it was great fun.

EE: Right. Well, you’ll tell us about all of that.

LM: Oh, yeah. Well, I typed—. All the boxcars—you know those crazy numbers on the boxcars?--I had to type all those numbers, and those numbers tell you what the cargo is in the container and--.

[0:10:02]

EE: Did you do a sheet for each of the cars or were they lists?

LM: One long list.

EE: A list?

LM: Yeah.

EE: A page for every day or for the group of cars?

LM: Every day. Every day. Everything that was unloaded that day, had come in.

EE: Would be on one sheet if it fitted on the page?

LM: Yeah. Mmhmm.

EE: And it was the number and then they information about it as well or--?

LM: Yes. What was in it, the cargo. Sometime ore or flax or barley or wheat. It was mostly wheat.

EE: And what were you working from in terms of typing these lines of information about each of the cars?

LM: Oh, they must have given it to me. I don't remember that. But I just remember I got a lot of practice typing numbers because I wasn't good at it before that. [Laughing]

EE: So the numbers would be, what, five or six digits long or even longer than that?

LM: Oh, no. About ten or twelve.

EE: Ten or twelve digits.

LM: And they'd have letters mixed in with the numbers, so it was--. You had to pay attention.

EE: That's--. I'm just wondering from what you would have been working. They surely weren't reading them off the car. Were there cards that came in or something?

LM: I can't remember that part.

EE: Because your eyes were focused on what you were--.

LM: At the end of the day, I had to sit down with one of the fellows and had to go over this big sheet I had typed during the day and learned a new way of counting. Instead of saying, “Fifteen or fifty,” we’d say, “Fif-tie” Instead of saying “sixty,” “six-tie,” so you didn’t get the numbers mixed up. That was fun.

EE: So “fif-tie” and “fifteen” were two different--?

LM: So you didn’t get it mixed up. “Fif-tie, six-tie, seven-tie.”

EE: And then the -tie was substituting for the -teen as we would say fifteen--.

LM: No. It was substituting for “seventy.”

EE: Oh, I see. The other way. Fifteen and “fif-tie.”

LM: And “seven-tie.” Yeah.

EE: Yeah. Well, you were actually just sounding the last two letters, weren’t you? Or sounding them as ty’s.

LM: Mmhmm.

EE: Right. So they were on sheets. I was envisioning a big--. Not by 11, but these were--.

LM: No, it was a big sheet. It must have been a different typewriter. So we had to go through this, read all this information at the end of the day, check it out, make sure there were no mistakes.

EE: Do you remember the person who was checking it with you? Was he looking at something or other as you read the numbers off to him? Because he would presumably have what came--.

LM: I remember we had a big ruler going.

EE: Sure.

LM: Number by number. I don’t remember what he was reading from, no.

EE: This is interesting. The very first person we interviewed was Roy Lamore, who has been active with Legion Branch Five for years. That's where I first got to know him. But he worked for CP Rail [Canadian Pacific Railway] at the Rosslyn Yards where they were recording, I guess, passing on information about each of the cars of what was in it and so on. So I'm assuming that that would have been the raw material from which then the record was being made up.

LM: Maybe. Perhaps.

EE: For Richardson's.

LM: Mmhmm.

EE: It wouldn't take all day to type that up, I don't suppose.

LM: No. I did other things too.

EE: Yes. What other sorts of things did you do?

LM: Reports and letters for the manager, the office manager, Mr. Hollingsworth. I don't know if he's still alive or not. He was very nice. They were all really nice. I got spoiled rotten. I was the only girl! So everybody going out at lunch would stop by. "Lynda, you want anything? We're going to Dairy Queen." Oh, it was great. [Laughing]

EE: It must have been quite something to be a Grade 10 student. So you'd be about 16 or so?

LM: Sixteen, yeah.

EE: Were you just 16? And all these--. How many men worked in the office?

LM: In the office? Let's see.

EE: Mr. Hollingsworth, obviously.

LM: Mr. Hollingsworth, Peter Stark, Groombridge, Leo Pumphrey. Four for sure that I can remember. Four for sure that I remember.

EE: Did you have a sense of the responsibilities of each of those men?

LM: One did books.

EE: Bookkeeper?

LM: Bookkeeping, yeah. Bill Groombridge was one that did the counting with me, and I guess he probably got the information from the cars. I don't know.

[0:15:12]

EE: Yes, or whatever form they came in on.

LM: Mmhmm.

EE: I guess one could think of manifests. Is that the jargon of the trade? I guess it was just to say a piece of paper that tells you what's in each of the cars in each case.

LM: Yeah. To me it was just my instructions. I didn't know.

EE: Yes. And you were just reading it off whatever was laid in front of you and focusing on the record you were making. I can well understand.

LM: It was a good bit of luck for me because the girl that worked there usually only got two weeks holiday, but she was going to Europe that year and asked for six weeks.

EE: So she got two months, did she?

LM: She got two months holidays, so I got a job. [Laughs] It was nice.

EE: Yes. There were friends of yours who were looking forward to enjoying a summer with you, and you were off with--.

LM: Oh, yeah. Yes.

EE: Admittedly you had money and you had--. How long a day did you put in?

LM: A full day. Oh, a full day.

E: Eight hours?

LM: Same as the men, yeah. Yeah. Walking down that pier though was the worst part with the fermenting grain and--.

EE: The office was that far? Alongside the ships, it was that far down was it actually?

LM: Yes. It was way, way down. It's very hard to see. I swore there was no office there.

EE: Is there an office at the front of the elevator as well?

LM: No.

EE: Because I've been in the Richardson's and--.

LM: You have to go way down the pier and then you'll see a railing come out.

EE: Right.

LM: And take about five steps up.

EE: So you were very close to the action. How close were you to where the cars were being unloaded? Were they--. Could you hear them or see them?

LM: Oh, you heard them. *Bump, bump*. You heard them shunting them. Yeah.

EE: Right. Because I'm just wondering whether there will have been--. They certainly mustn't have manifested each of the cars. So there wasn't a piece of paper that they would have pulled off each of these cars and brought in for you to type up?

LM: Well, somebody must have brought that into me and that's my--.

EE: Yeah. However it came. It would be the simplest way if they attached one to each of the cars out at the local yard where it came in.

LM: As they dumped it maybe.

EE: Yeah, and then removed it. Maybe we'll talk later about others who worked there and so on and so forth. So what were--. What other men in the office would you have dealt with then? It was primarily it was primarily Mr. Groombridge did you say?

LM: Mr. Hollingsworth was manager.

EE: Was the boss.

LM: It was Bill or Bob Groombridge.

EE: And he was the one who had responsibility for the cars among other things for the contents.

LM: Yeah, and he would read back things with me. And Peter Stark, and he's one I just ran into recently. He was the one that told me that the other elevators had their offices downtown. Leo Pumphrey. Now I don't know what Leo did.

EE: So if we were to think about the other kinds of, as you were saying, correspondence to the headquarters in Winnipeg, I suppose.

LM: I don't know where they went. I remember the head foreman ended up being the general manager, and he just died recently. I knew his name, but now it's gone out of my head. You probably knew him. That's no good to you though. [Laughs]

EE: Well, I glance over the obituaries regularly, daily, and every time I see someone who worked at the elevators is gone, I get a little bit a twinge there. Too bad we did catch him before he was gone.

LM: Yeah. So, it was a good experience for me. It was nice to see what went on because I would take my lunch break outside in spite of the smell. But to get to meet the guys and see how hard they worked. My brother who was a millwright, he worked his butt off. He was a very hard worker. He'd come home just exhausted. Just--.

EE: One of the interesting things about this is that they worked at the UGG, and you ended up at Richardson's, not very far from one another, actually, these elevators at foot of Current River.

LM: My father would flip in his grave if he knew that his little asthmatic girl was working in a grain elevator.

EE: He'd passed on by that time already, had he?

LM: He had passed on by then.

EE: I see.

LM: But he had to wear the extra overalls because I was asthmatic and couldn't have the grain dust. And here I end up working in one. Crazy!

[0:20:04]

EE: And of course, in those days through the '50s and '60s, the grain dust remained in the skies of Thunder Bay. It was really only in the '70s that they really came to grips, I think, with--. Although, there was some attempt in the late '40s. We've actually interviewed people who worked with some of the dust control at various points over the years, but it was still pretty dusty, I'm sure.

LM: Well, it must have been '63 or '64, '63 when I was there. Yeah. Because I graduated in '65.

EE: Right. Because your asthma won't have been helped at all by what was in the air.

LM: Well, the strange thing is that when I was 12 years old, the doctor said I had outgrown it. But I didn't really because I was 48 and I was in Guelph, it came back horrendously. [Laughs]

EE: I see.

LM: Yes. I nearly died.

EE: So the air quality remains a concern of yours still?

LM: Yes. Oh, yes. Mmhmm.

EE: Lungs aren't what they should be.

LM: A lot of things. But I missed so much school. My twin sister would have to go to school, get the lessons, bring them home, and teach me. And I would get in just enough hours to say that they can put me ahead the next year. And they, "Get enough work done, then we'll pass you on to the next grade." That went on until Grade 7.

EE: I see.

LM: Then when I was 12, the doctor said, "Well, you've outgrown your asthma." So.

EE: Did you agree with him?

LM: Well, I was breathing better, and I could go to school more. I was happy. [Laughing]

EE: Well, I suppose if one were going to suffer from asthma during one's growing up years, the first seven years would be better than the next seven because grade school is more forgiving of absence than high school would have been.

LM: Yes. I wasn't afraid then to take this job.

EE: No.

LM: I was at first, of course, you know. Shovelling grain wasn't going to be a good idea for me but.

EE: Yes. Did you meet many of the grain shovelers while you were there? Any at all?

LM: I didn't, no. No. But they don't do it by hand.

EE: You discovered that?

LM: Well, no. But I thought they did. I saw inspectors come, grain inspectors come and get shovels full of grain and go putting their hands through and stuff, but I never saw anybody actually shovelling mounds of grain.

EE: So they didn't give you a tour of the elevator to show you what it was all about?

LM: No, no.

EE: Or show you where the cars were being--. You could hear them?

LM: I could hear them shunting, yes. Oh, yeah.

EE: And you didn't meet the crewmen from the salties either, I don't suppose. No one--. Did anyone from the ships come into the office?

LM: Uh, a few did. Yeah. With strange accents.

EE: Was the office quite a busy place in terms of people coming in and out?

LM: No. No, not really. The head foreman came in. I wish I could remember his name.

EE: Well, it may come back, and give me a call and let me know, and I'll add it to the written record.

LM: Because he became the general manager.

EE: Yes.

LM: A tall, good-looking guy. Oh, I can't think of it.

EE: The only manager at Richardson's that comes to mind for me would be Jim Simpson.

LM: That's who it was!

EE: [Laughs] Because Jim ran against me in '84.

LM: Jim Simpson, that's who it was!

EE: As the Conservative candidate. And he was tall, and I'm prepared to concede he was good looking, so. [Laughing]

LM: When I was there, he was working out in the elevator.

EE: Yeah. I gathered he'd worked his way up. I was interested to see that when I saw the obituary.

LM: And he was a foreman when I was there. And he would pop in and do something, and then he would go out.

EE: Sure.

LM: So. Yeah, that's who--. Oh, you've got a good memory!

EE: Well, as I say, he ran against me in '84, so I have good reason. [Laughing]

LM: Ah.

EE: Then further, his father had been a doctor in Gretna, Manitoba, where my wife's family were living and so on. So there was that kind of connection back to the '30s and all of that.

LM: And he beat you?

EE: No, I beat him!

LM: Oh, I guess so. [Laughing]

EE: He was the Conservative candidate. There were some people who thought he was going to win in '84, but that's another story. Although, I might tell the story about years later. His daughter lived at that time some years ago—I don't know whether she still

does—around the corner from us. And so I was canvassing for the Coalition for Waverly Park with Magnus in the Park campaign, and lo and behold there was Jim Simpson at her home that day.

[0:2514]

LM: Oh really?

EE: I was needing to write up the receipt for the donation that was made to the campaign and Jim Simpson turned around and leaned over and offered me his back to write the receipt on. [Laughing] That's a very distinctive memory of a man who I got to know in the context of the '84 election campaign.

LM: You do a lot of stuff. I'm really glad you came up with this name because it's been bothering me. Really bothering me.

EE: It's a very interesting thing, the fact that Jim Simpson and--. I don't know how he became the foreman. Whether he worked as a grain handler earlier and then was promoted or not.

LM: Oh, he must have. How would he become the foreman?

EE: But then his rising to be superintendent of that elevator, for Richardson's, I thought was very interesting.

LM: Yeah.

EE: In fact, what did you--. You didn't have any comparative experience other than sort of knowing a little bit about UGG from your father's and brother's experiences. But how did you find Richardson's as a company, as an employer? Do you have any memories of that?

LM: Well, the only memory I have is getting the paycheque. [Laughing] I mean--.

EE: Regularly.

LM: I thought it was great! And getting spoiled at lunch hour was great. The only bad part was walking that pier every morning, especially if there was a saltie in.

EE: Yeah. How much were you paid, if I may ask?

LM: I don't remember.

EE: Did you get to keep the money?

LM: It was the minimum. Oh, yeah. Of course. Yeah.

EE: Your father--. Oh, your father was--. You weren't having to help to support the family because you'd been planning to enjoy the summer.

LM: Well, I got to buy new school clothes which was nice.

EE: Yes.

LM: It was a tight thing for mom because she didn't get a lot of money, so I got new school clothes.

EE: Yeah, so at this point in '63, who was still at home with your mother then? You and your sister obviously.

LM: Oh, yeah. My brother Bob, my sister Edie, and I guess that's it. The rest had sort of gone off on their own.

EE: So the four of you still then. Of course, with the brother, this was the millwright was it?

LM: No, that was my brother Bud, whose name is really Lloyd the same as my father, but they called him Bud so it wouldn't get confusing.

EE: I ran across the Vester name somewhere the other day, but lord knows where that would have been.

LM: My brother--.

EE: Was your family United Church by any chance?

LM: Pardon?

EE: Was your family United Church or--?

LM: Uh, we went to Calvin Presbyterian in Current River, and when it closed down as it frequently did—no preacher—we would go over to United, yeah.

EE: Right. Because I've been working on the historic roll at St. Paul's, members years back, and I'm just wondering whether that's where I saw the surname the other day.

LM: There's a lot of Vesters.

EE: A lot of Vesters. Where does the Vester family come from?

LM: Well, my mom came right over on the boat from Ireland. My father, you know, I don't--. He was born in the little town of Blenheim, and we don't know much about him. He just wandered. When he was 13, his family died.

EE: This is in southern Ontario?

LM: Yes. And he took his younger brother—he was 13—and he took his younger brother and hit the road. And then saved money, saved money, and went to Coyne Electric School in Chicago. I've still got a big plaque of his and his done in bronze or copper of his electrical degree. Yeah, he did it himself.

EE: Yes, sort of his certificate of--.

LM: Yeah. It's big. It's his Master of Electrical. Ticket--. It's very nice.

EE: So he studied in Chicago, and then what brought him up here?

LM: Well, I don't know. What brought my mother? [Laughing] My mom, well, my uncle lived here. My uncle came over here. He was a contractor, that was my grandfather. Tom Jones came over here as a contractor, and they stayed and they built Black Bay Bridge, which is named after that policeman.

EE: Yes, now.

LM: Then he worked for Townline Construction or something, then took the whole family back to Ireland. When my mother—she was 8 then—when she turned 18, she got on a boat, and she came back here by herself, met my dad, and they got married, and then her brother Tom, T.A. Sr., came back over and started his--.

[0:30:18]

EE: So you're related through your mother to the Jones family here in the city? The construction family?

LM: Yeah, well, you can choose your friends, but you can't always choose your relatives.

EE: There's a temptation to ask you to expand on that observation, but I suppose we should pass, should we?

LM: Yeah. Well, mostly I have a lot of very good memories of them and activities that happened. Just a few incidents that were hurtful to my mother.

EE: Yeah. That's interesting.

LM: **[Whispers]** Oh, I'm right here.

EE: So what else do you remember about the involvement at the Richardson's that summer?

LM: Not too much more, just the hike down the pier and then walking through the bush, you know, down by the blind home. That's where I would go. And all the skinny little foxes that would come out looking for stuff, and I thought, "I bet you--."

EE: So it was full of little foxes?

LM: Lots of little fox, and they were skinny. And I thought they looked hungry enough to take a bite out of me!

EE: Well, if you'd laid down on the ground, who knows.

LM: So I would run like a Dickens to the bus stop, but it was a very enjoyable experience for me. The summer went very, very fast. I thought, “Oh, I’ve got to work the whole summer. It’s going to take forever.” But I liked it very much. And Mr. Westbrook when I went back to school said, “So, how was grain shovelling?” [Laughing] I said, “Well, it was really great. I loved it!” [Laughs]

EE: Now did you bring your experience to the classroom when you came back?

LM: No. No, but I told him about it.

EE: Didn’t get a chance to tell others about the advantages of office work?

LM: No, I told him about it, but he says, “I told you you wouldn’t be shovelling grain.” [Laughing] But it was very nice of him to give me the job. He knew I needed the money, and then he got me my job at Hammarskjold too, so.

EE: After you graduated?

LM: Yeah. I went to Hammarskjold and was there for 12 years.

EE: Oh, yes. Hammarskjold, was it quite new at the time?

LM: Yes. It was--.

EE: Brand new?

LM: Just three years old. And it was packed.

EE: Oh, yes. I’m assuming did you complete Grade 12 or Grade 13?

LM: I did Grade 12 commercial.

EE: So it was started in ’62 then. Was it built in ’62? I’m just taking the dates here.

LM: Yes, yes.

EE: If you started then in '64, then it would--.

LM: Yes, '62.

EE: Or--. Sorry.

LM: It was three years old when I went there.

EE: In '65? Because you were--.

LM: In fact, now I'm working on the 50th anniversary. Or what do you call it?

OM: Reunion?

LM: Reunion.

EE: That's the joy of having been in the office, eh? If they find you, they'll draft you for that kind of activity, I'm sure.

LM: Yes. It's amazing how many kids you can remember though.

EE: I daresay.

LM: Because way back it was easier to remember than who I met yesterday.

EE: Yeah, you'd probably be a resource for my looking for young people who joined St. Paul's United Church through the '60s. You'd probably recognize some number of those names I imagine because they will have been teenagers through those years, probably some of them going to Hammarskjold probably.

LM: Well, going to Lakeview, looking out the window at all of those elevators, that was a beautiful view. We were lucky the way that building was built with that wing out there. And you look out and see the elevators and the Giant, the Sleeping Giant. It was really nice.

EE: This is a--. You suggested earlier from the picture in the book—maybe not just one picture in the book—some sense of the importance of the elevators for Thunder Bay, and now you're giving it a scenic aspect as well.

LM: Yes. Well, in Current River School that the textbook was saying how important it was to the world. It was the world's largest elevators, and they had pictures of it. And it just made me feel so proud, you know, that--. Mm. It felt nice. [Laugh]

EE: I put a couple of pages about the terminal elevators down on paper for the project. We're on the brink of applying to Parks Canada to have a historic site designated for one particular elevator over on the Kam. That's the one we've had to settle on. So this gave me reason to think about the importance of the grain elevators. Of course, I'm a farmer's son from Manitoba. My dad sold his grain for many years to Paterson. So when we came to town in '78, the Paterson Elevator was being knocked down, so that was a bit of a tug to see the elevator through which the grain had moved all those years, going.

[0:35:32]

LM: I heard on the news last night that the grain shipment last year was up three percent?

EE: Yeah. I was interested to see that.

LM: So that sounds good.

EE: Yes.

LM: When they put Churchill, all those elevators up there, that sort of doomed us a bit.

EE: It reduced the flow somewhat I'm sure, although I don't know that Churchill was all that important. Interesting, when I was in parliament, Iain and I were the MPs of course from here, and Ron Murphy was the MP for Churchill, and Jim Fulton was the MP for the Prince Rupert area, and Margaret Mitchell and Sven Robinson and Iain were three of the MPs for Vancouver. So I can think that the NDP caucus contained all of the MPs for the various grain trade cities of Canada, the export locations, curiously enough. It's just one of those--.

LM: So what do you think made the grain fall off here?

EE: [Laughing] Well, I think there were a number of reasons, and one of them is, I think, the decline in the Atlantic business—the European demand, Russian demand, and so on—and the rise in the Pacific. But there must be other factors, and of course, when I was in the House of Commons it was easy to blame the Western Grain Transportation Act which had been passed by the Liberal Government in the previous parliament for that, for the fact that the Crows Nest Pass agreement, the Crow Rate, had been ended and so on. I think there were a number of factors at work, but certainly the business is not what it was.

LM: No. But now they've got that big arm--.

EE: Yes, the crane.

LM: To load stuff, and I bet you they're going to be moving windmills or what do you call those things?

EE: Stuff for the tar sands and so on.

LM: Big parts. Big, big, big stuff.

EE: Because they have moved some of the veins for the wind turbines have certainly moved through the port here already out to Dorian and so on. Now, I've asked various people, so I don't give a definitive answer any longer on it. It's easy to blame the Crow Rate, but certainly the trade went into decline. Some of it, I guess, is automation, too, for that matter because Frank Mazur was a good friend of mine, my supporter actually in the '84 campaign--.

LM: I remember that name.

EE: And president of Lodge 650 of BRAC [Brotherhood of Railway, Airline, and Steamship Clerks], the grain handlers. And he talked about 1,800 members of his union in the elevators.

LM: I remember that name.

EE: These days if there are 250 or 300 working in the elevators, I think we're probably doing well to have numbers that high.

LM: I just had a flash memory. The Grain Growers used to have a big picnic. You know where the casino grounds were?

EE: Yeah. Down--.

LM: Down on Cumberland. There was a big building there. It was all stones on the outside with all this crushed glass. My sister and I thought it was jewels. It had a big veranda, and they would have races for all the kids and then a meal inside for all the family every summer. It was great fun. We used to look after it. And some guy Dan—and Irishman—Dan was the one that always said, “Get set, get ready, get going!” Do you know him?

EE: Is this--. I came to town in 1978.

LM: The building burnt down.

EE: I see. I think of Keskus in that area when we got to town, but this was before Keskus.

LM: No, no. This is--.

OM: Way down.

LM: This is way down, way down near the dam. Where the dam is.

EE: Oh, I see.

LM: Mmhmm. Where those grounds are.

EE: Ok.

LM: Well, there was a huge, big building there with a big veranda so if it rained you could eat out there. But inside it was a dining hall. And then there was all kinds of races and things for the kids, and the elevator put that on every summer for the kids. That was fun.

OM: I was a Fort William boy.

EE: Oh, I see.

OM: I was a Fort William boy. I never could get the bus all the way down to that end.

EE: So this was below the Current River dam, somewhere in that park area on Cumberland?

[0:40:01]

LM: Yes. Yes. Just above that. Coming towards this way from the dam. All that green grass.

EE: Right.

LM: Yes.

EE: Yes. I see, so there was--.

LM: There was a beautiful building there, and it got burned down.

EE: This was the building around which the Lord's Day Act excitement will have existed, I imagine. There was some kind of gathering place near Current River that--.

LM: They called it the casino building.

EE: Ok, so they actually called it that? Because that's what threw me off. I was thinking of the current casino downtown.

LM: Oh.

EE: No. Because that troubled the ministers more than 100 years ago, all this activity with the tram line, and so people could go out there and participate on Sundays and so on and so forth. Social history of that Lakehead.

LM: It was nice.

EE: So that was where there would be a picnic for--.

LM: Every summer.

EE: Every summer for the UGG picnic.

LM: Yeah.

EE: Right.

LM: And like it was really good prizes. [Laughs]

EE: Because UGG was a farmer-owned company whereas Richardson was a classic grain merchant family business.

LM: Oh, I didn't know.

EE: You didn't get any sense of those kinds of dynamics, or you weren't aware of unions at the two places?

LM: So it didn't have that family sense.

EE: No, at Richardson's.

LM: Yeah.

EE: Well, are there other aspects of the summer?

LM: I don't think so.

EE: Your father passed away early, sadly enough. Your brother worked there for quite a long time at the UGG?

LM: He worked there, and he passed away earlier. He was 40 when he passed away.

EE: Oh, good grief. Would you blame that on the conditions, the occupational health?

LM: Well, he worked really hard, but I guess the heart problem runs in the family. Then my third brother died away at 40.

EE: I see, so--.

LM: And the next brother who was the OPP, he lived in fear that he was going to die at 40, so he just lived life very well.

EE: Much more carefully.

LM: But he did have his first heart attack at 33, open heart surgery, and they fixed him up. So he's had five bypasses.

EE: He's still alive?

LM: But he's still alive and kicking.

EE: At what age now?

LM: How old am I? Ok, I'm 65, and he's eight years older than me. So 73.

EE: 73, nice.

LM: Yeah.

EE: Comparatively speaking, he's done marvellously.

LM: Yeah. Yeah. He's done really well. Now the girls, there are six girls. We all have hypertension, so no heart attacks. Just runs in the family. Yeah.

EE: Yeah. Well, Owen, do you have any questions that came to mind?

OM: Nothing that is worth having on the cartridge, but I do have some questions afterwards that I'm going to ask.

LM: Yeah.

EE: Ok. Well, I think there are questions in the questionnaire that really-- Well, I might actually ask what would you want people to remember about the—Or what would you like to tell people who hear this tape at some point about that summer? What was the most dramatic thing or--?

LM: Uh, don't prejudge something because--. Like I did. I thought, "Well, I could never work in an elevator. Good lord!" because it was a really great time. Go and try something! [Laughs]

EE: Yeah. What's interesting about this interview is that you're the first office worker from a grain company that we've interviewed, I think. So we might ask you for a name or two or three after we finish this for further contacts to see whether we can talk to someone.

LM: Well, I don't know any others.

EE: No. They're all gone, eh?

LM: The others worked apparently downtown in offices, so--.

EE: Yeah. Well, I'm thinking of Richardson itself as far as that's concerned.

LM: Oh, well, the only one took off, and I went in the next day, and then I went, and she came back. So I never did meet her.

EE: Yes. No. Well, I'm thinking of the men as well for that matter.

LM: Oh.

EE: Yes, women of course were scarce in the trade for a long time. I guess the grain inspectors began to work towards gender parity sometime starting into the '80s I would suspect. Well, late '70s, actually. We've interviewed some women who became grain inspectors, joined the Grain Commission in the late '70s.

LM: They make good money.

EE: Yeah. [Laughing] I daresay!

LM: I think better than me! But I was only 16, so. [Laughs]

EE: Yes. Well, of course. Right. Well, thank you very much, Lynda, for telling us about a great summer of your life.

LM: It's been a pleasure! That's a good memory I have.

EE: You've done pretty well. Thanks very much.

LM: Thank you.

End of interview.