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Company Affiliations: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool

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Summary: Retired lead grain accountant for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Ron Oikonen discusses his career in the Wheat Pool's administrative office in Thunder Bay. First, he shares his earliest memories of Thunder Bay's grain industry: The explosions at Elevators Pool 4A and 4B. He then describes his roles within the Wheat Pool as a clerk, on the shipping desk, and as lead grain accountant. He details how the accounting division kept track of grain inventories in the Thunder Bay Pool elevators, and how they coordinated with other organizations like Lake Shippers Clearance Association and the railways to move grain out of port efficiently. Another major responsibility was preparing for Canadian Grain Commission elevator audits, and he describes dealing with overages, shortages, and blending of grain. Oikonen also discusses the changes to the operation and the industry, including computerization, automation, health and safety improvements, the closure of elevators, the switch to metric units, and downsizing. He also observes recent changes since his retirement, like changes to the port with the imminent Canadian Wheat Board closure and Saskatchewan Wheat Pool's privatization as Viterra. Other topics discussed include alcohol use in elevators, women in the workforce, interactions with ship loading operations, common export destinations, historical cooperation between grain companies, tours of Wheat Pool facilities for farmers, and the demolition of Pool 6 Elevator.

Keywords: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool (SWP); Grain accounting; Grain inventories; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Grain transportation—rail; Grain transportation—ships; Shipping logistics; Lake Shippers' Clearance Association (Canadian Ports Clearance Association); Canadian Grain Commission; Grain coordination; Grain inspection; Grain elevator audits; Grain cleaning; Screenings; Grain pellets; Grain dust; Dust control; Automation; Computerization; Health and safety; Downsizing; Canadian Wheat Board; Viterra; Alcohol and drug abuse; Women in the workplace; Privatization; Lakehead Terminal Elevators Association; Metric conversions; Seafarers; Grain trimmers; Ship loading; Grain farmers/producers; SWP Elevator 4A and 4B; SWP Elevator 5; SWP Elevator 6; SWP Elevator 7A and 7B; SWP Elevator 8; SWP Elevator 10; SWP Elevator 11; SWP Elevator 14; SWP Elevator 15; SWP Elevator 4A explosion; SWP Elevator 4B explosion; Grain elevator disasters; Grain elevator explosions

Time, Speaker, Narrative

NP: This is an interview being conducted on Laurel Crescent in Thunder Bay on November 3rd, 2011. I will let our narrator introduce himself and his connection with the grain trade.

RO: My name is Ron Oikonen, and I've worked for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool for 36 years.

NP: Good. So you'll have a little bit of a story to tell us. We usually start by asking people--. Well, first of all, you mentioned 36 years. Do you happen to know when you started and when you ended, just to give us an idea?

RO: I started in 1961 and retired in 1997.

NP: Okay, good. You lived through or worked through a lot of change times then. But let's go right to the very beginning. How did you first get connected with the grain industry?

RO: Well, I got hired to work in the office that was at the Whalen Building or PUC. It had so many different names. The Thunder Bay Hydro Building. [Laughs] I was a clerk then.

NP: Was there something in particular that interested you in a position with the grain industry, or it was something that you were qualified to do?

RO: I was qualified to do, but I didn't--. To tell you the truth, at that time I didn't know very much about the grain industry outside of the big grain elevators standing on the harbour.

NP: Did you grow up in Thunder Bay?

RO: Yes.

NP: And that was your only connection, then, with the grain elevators was the fact that they were there?

RO: Well, the only other connection I had too was I was coming back from my grandparents' camp in Pebbly Beach in 1945 or '46 when one of the first elevators blew up. So we were coming down Hodder Avenue, and it was fire trucks and everything there. It was different. And the other one was I went to Shuniah School, which is --if you know the geography--is higher up on the hill. So I

was walking home for lunch, and we seen this big mushroom come up, and we thought--. At that time, everybody was talking about the atomic bomb. We thought the atomic bomb had been dropped! There was another, unfortunately, another elevator, I guess, due to grain dust blew up.

NP: So that would have been 1952 because there was another explosion there.

RO: Yeah.

NP: Was it the same elevators that blew up in both cases?

RO: I believe so.

NP: That's what I thought, but sometimes the elevators change names, so--.

RO: Yeah, they change numbers basically.

NP: Change numbers, yes. So let's go back to that earlier situation, then, coming back from Pebbly Beach. What else do you recall about that explosion and the follow up?

RO: Not very much because I was fairly young at the time, so it just was like chaos going down, I guess it would have been, Cumberland Street, because it was quite an explosion. I think the first one was the worst one from--. I'm trying to recollect.

NP: Mmhmm. They blend together a bit.

RO: Yeah. And if you know an elevator, for them to blow up with those huge concrete silos, it's got to be a heck of an explosion.

NP: So when you were coming back, then, was it after the explosion or--? Well, it must have been because there was time for the emergency vehicles to get there.

RO: It was after. After, yeah. So I really don't remember much else about it. And the other one was, I guess, it was 1952. I just read about it in the paper after. It was not great. But when I went to work in the elevators, there were still guys working for Sask Pool that survived it, so.

NP: They were Sask Wheat Pool elevators?

RO: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

NP: Yeah. So that must have been--.

RO: I believe they're both, one for sure. The first one, I'm not sure who owned it at the time because there was a change of--. Well, there's been quite a few changes of ownership over the years.

NP: Did the fellows that you worked with, then, when you first started, did they have stories about being involved in it that you recall?

RO: Not really. I think they're like war veterans. They survived and did what they could, and it's the past.

NP: And they still continued to work in the industry?

RO: Well, by now, I think most they'd all be retired.

NP: But at that time, even though they were through the explosion, they still--.

RO: Yeah, the ones that wanted to and survived went back. It was a good place to work, so.

NP: Yeah. So starting as a clerk with Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, I'm asking you to dig way back deep. Do you recall your early times on the job and what kinds of things you had to do?

RO: Well, it was all associated with grain. Really, in essence, the grain comes in--. What we used to have to do in those days before it got automated was you had to figure out where the car came from, which country elevator, and you'd have to do the freight on it. And it was all bushels in those days. You'd have to convert it. They would weigh it, and you would have to convert it into bushels, like pounds into bushels. Then wheat had different ones, oats, barley, all that stuff.

[0:05:24]

NP: So were you taken under someone's wing, somebody who had been there before?

RO: Oh, yeah. There was a fair staff at that time. It's gone quite a bit down now because--. And then later on when I was working for Sask Pool, they bought out--. Ah, I forget, Western Grain or Empire. At one time, I think we had 10 or 11 elevators going and about 1,800 or 1,900 men working, so.

NP: In all, like, within Saskatchewan Wheat Pool operation here?

RO: Yeah, just the Sask Pool's, though. You can imagine across the waterfront with everybody else how many people were working in the industry.

NP: Was it a pressure cooker type of job, or were things just steady?

RO: They were. In the winter, they would never lay us office workers off. It got fairly quiet. But for about nine, ten months of the year, it was pretty busy. Pretty steady. [Telephone rings] See who that is.

[Audio pauses]

NP: It's like a pressure cooker, or whether it was fairly steady.

RO: It could be very busy at times. At that time, most of the grain in Canada was coming through Thunder Bay, or at that time Port Arthur, Fort William. It was interesting. And crops changed. It always depended on, and still does to this day, what the crop was out west, like how much they're going to export and where it's going to go through.

NP: Again, I'm going to ask you to delve deeply back, and I asked you just a little earlier about whether you were taken under someone's wing. In talking to the older fellows—at that time, they were probably about 40—who had been in the industry before you, do you recall any stories that they might have told about the early days and the changes they'd seen?

RO: Well, at that time, it hadn't changed a lot. That was before metric came in and automation. In fact, we all used comptometers. I don't know if you've ever seen one of those things. [Laughs] Anyways, I won't explain it but it's a whole bunch of buttons, how you can add up.

NP: It's like an adding machine?

RO: It's a square thing with a whole bunch of keys, and it just has a little thing that you can--. If you want four, you can either hit four, but if you wanted a bigger number—I'm trying to remember—you would go 11 x 4 or something. Anyway, you had to convert everything back into bushels, so.

NP: So that machine was specially made to do that type of calculation?

RO: I think it was just a thing. In those days, it was in the market, but then the adding machines started to come in.

NP: I wonder if one of those would be around anymore.

RO: I have one somewhere.

NP: You have one somewhere?

RO: Yeah. I can show it to you if I can find it. [Laughing] I'm not sure where I've put it, so.

NP: Okay. Well, make sure that it doesn't end up in the dump. [Laughs]

RO: Oh, no. Oh, no. I kept it. It still works, but I--. And nowadays, everything's computerized.

NP: Well, it would be interesting to have you find it, wherever it is and tell me how it works so that--. Because you may be one of the few people left who even had to use it.

RO: Who has it.

NP: Definitely who has one.

RO: Yeah. I'm not sure how many other people would have them, but the whole staff at that time were using them.

NP: Yeah, yeah.

RO: Because I was in the grain side, and they had the--. Used to do the payrolls and everything in those days in the office.

NP: So these old fellows that were there, they weren't the kind to say, "Oh, well, in my day, sonny, when--."

RO: No. It was actually a pretty good working environment. It was a good company to work for.

NP: Who were the head people then, do you recall?

RO: Lindeman was—I forget his first name now—Lindeman was the--. I think called him the--. What title did he have? They didn't call him manager. General superintendent. Then there was the superintendents of the elevators. I think his name was Tommy Johnson was the head of the office part, and there was a lady that was the head of the payroll, Doris--. I've forgotten her last name, so. [Laughs]

NP: One of the rare women in the operation, then.

RO: Well, there was quite a few.

NP: Were there?

RO: Oh, yeah.

NP: In the office staff?

RO: There was, yeah. This was in that transition change before--. Some had come back. Once they had gotten married, they had to leave, but this was 1961 when I started, so things were starting to change. There was quite a few women on both sides.

[0:10:19]

NP: Anything surprise you about the operation as a new employee? You said you didn't know anything about the grain industry, and here you were in the thick of it.

RO: No, they explained it pretty good. The older people would help you. You had to know math pretty good, and then you had to start under--. The biggest difference was understanding the grain part of it—wheat, oats, barley—the whole thing. And each one of those would have different grades, so you would have--. At the end of the day, you'd have to do a stock sheet, they called it. It was

like your running balance. What came in, what went out, and what was at the end, and you'd have a whole bunch of things in between. You could dry stuff, transfer stuff, all that kind of stuff. And then you'd have to take it down to, I guess, it was the CN [Canadian National Railway] or the CP [Canadian Pacific Railway] station, and it would be on its way to Winnipeg, and they'd get it the next morning. [Laughs] That was a while ago.

NP: So that was by train?

RO: By train, yeah.

NP: So a little package would go off to head office in--?

RO: Yeah. And they'd send it back. Well, actually, our head office was--. Our terminal division office was in Winnipeg because the Wheat Board was there and the--. What do they call the market where they do the trading? But the actual head office was always in Regina, which I think it still is for Viterra.

NP: We'll come back to talk about what kind of connection you had with the terminal elevator operation Winnipeg piece and then the Saskatchewan piece. Who were the other people? You know, you mentioned the payroll person. What other administrative staff were in the office that you worked in?

RO: Well, there was Dave Tweedley, he was the--. I'm trying to think of the titles.

NP: Well, just in general what they did.

RO: He was kind of head of the grain accounting part. There was Jack Novak, who just recently passed away. Ted Maze. Alex Wilson is gone now. There was quite a few. There's still quite a few living, but not as many as there used to be from my era.

NP: So what--? So you had the payroll, you had the accounting. What other--?

RO: That would be about it. You know, they would have--. I'm trying to think who did the negotiations and all that stuff in those days. Someone out of our office and somebody would come down from Winnipeg would come down to--. Because in those days they—and I think they still do—they negotiate as the Lakehead, I think it's the Terminal Elevator Association. So they basically did everything. You know, in those days you had payroll, but it was also the UIC. All that kind of stuff. Kept track of your personnel records and all of that kind of stuff.

NP: A lot of paper.

RO: There was a lot of paper. Well, there still is to this day with computers. [Laughs] I don't know if it's changed much!

NP: You started as a clerk. I'm assuming that your career changed a little bit over the years, so--.

RO: Yeah, you progressed over the years, and you went to--. They've changed all the titles. Senior clerk, then you're head of the shipping desk, which was interesting too. I don't know if you've run across--. Have you gone to Lake Shippers yet?

NP: No, actually. We did talk to Gene Onchulenko who was with them, but not from your end.

RO: Yeah. He'd be a good guy to talk to.

NP: So tell me about what being in charge of the shipping desk meant.

RO: Well, two things would happen. Either they'd phone you—and in those days, you'd phone an order in and have to repeat it twice because you didn't want to make a mistake—and then you'd phone it to the elevators. Or else, Lake Shippers would phone and ask, “Do you have X number of bushels of, say, [No.] 3 Red in?” And so, you'd check and let them know because they had to assign the boats. And they would get information fairly regularly from you as well. In those days, I think they had a far bigger staff than they do now.

NP: So let's go back to that, the actual process of getting something shipped. So just work through. How did it start?

RO: Well, Lake Shippers, I guess, would get an order from the Wheat Board or somebody, and they would check which elevator had it. And they also had, from what I remember, the capacity of your elevators. You would get X-percent. Like Sask Pool would get, I don't know, at that time, say, 30 or 40 percent. Manitoba Pool might get 20 percent, 30. So they'd also assign it on that basis, and also availability of grain.

[0:15:21]

NP: So they would, in order to be fair, on the basis of the size of your business and the farmers feeding into it, they would give--. They wouldn't just call one company. They would try to be--.

RO: No, no. But sometimes they had to just go where the grain was, but they would later on try to make up for it, because the big thing about elevators is when it's really busy, it's coming in, and for it to keep coming in, something has to go out. So you know, sometimes you'd get pretty plugged up, so you'd be looking for a boat. Probably the same way now. So that's how they did it.

NP: So when you said you had to--.

RO: And then you had to phone the elevator, and you had to make sure they got the order right. And if it was off-hours, you always--. Sometimes we had to work Saturdays, half a day for a while there. You always had phone numbers, and the foreman or somebody had to be around so they could take the order. You had to always make sure you got a hold of somebody. You couldn't just leave it. That boat's sitting out there, and he's ready to come in, so.

NP: Did things ever go wrong?

RO: Oh. [Laughs] Well, I think there was the odd little mistake made. Not very often. No, they were pretty good.

NP: And what happens when a mistake is made? What kind of mistake can be made and what are the consequences?

RO: Well, they can put the wrong grade on, and two things can happen. Either you've got to offload it, which is very expensive, or else you make a deal with the other elevator that they'll--. How did that work? You keep it on the boat, but you try to make a deal with somebody else that they could take your [No.] 1 Red or whatever. They always tried to work it out. The last thing you wanted to do was offload it.

NP: What did offloading it require?

RO: Literally take it off the boat and put it back in the elevators.

NP: How'd they do that?

RO: They had this big--. It's like a suction thing that comes in. It reverses it back out. It's slower than putting it on, so it takes time.

NP: Costly?

RO: Well, yeah, because you're paying to bring it back in, whereas you wanted it to go out. That's where you make your money too. I'm trying to think what the breakdown was. It's probably still the same. You made X-number of cents per bushel—I guess it's tonnes now—coming in, and you got paid the rest when it went out. You'd probably have to talk to an operation guy a little better on the actual doing it. They would have to get it on a belt and back into the bin and all that kind of stuff. There was a little bit of fun when that ever happened. [Laughs] Somebody would get heck.

NP: [Laughs] So that would be your major connection with the elevators, then, was just making sure things went smoothly, getting the order?

RO: Well, you had a lot of interaction with them because you talked to them on the phone. A lot of them would come up to the office for various reasons too, so. And you always seen the foremen. They'd come up for meetings and stuff, so. And the odd time, they would take the staff down there just so you knew what an elevator was. So you know, when I finally retired, our actual office was right in the elevator.

NP: Which one?

RO: It was in 7A. They renovated it. They still have the office building down there. But it actually worked out a lot better because you're right there with the government staff, with our staff.

NP: Do you recall the first time you went inside an elevator?

RO: Well.

NP: And any impressions?

RO: Well, it was big. [Laughing] And you also have to be pretty careful, though. They were pretty careful where they showed you. Don't forget, you have belts running, sometimes bins could be open. If you dropped down in one of them, it's not fun. Some of the rail cars coming in, you have to be very careful too, and even walking on the dock. It's not that wide. I don't know if you've been down them, but if you happen to be doing it in the winter, it's pretty slippery. In fact, lots of times they would stop us when I ended up working down there. You couldn't walk down there. You had to go in through the workhouse and stuff because the water was dripping down, and it was icy and kind of [inaudible] that way.

NP: An angle on the dock?

RO: Sort of yeah. Any kind of ice, you can just go.

NP: Mmhmm.

RO: Hurt yourself or slip into the, well, ice at that time, but you never know. It could be open too and still frozen on the walkway thing.

[0:20:03]

NP: Were there any other challenges in the sort of shipping end of things from your administrative perspective?

RO: Not really. Well, I guess the challenge is to make sure you have enough grain and nobody makes a mistake, all that kind of stuff.

NP: What was your connection, then, with the railways, the obtaining the grain part of it.

RO: I got into that more a bit later, but really what it was was the--. It had changed a lot. When it first went, I think the railways and the Wheat Board or somebody just assigned the cars, and you took them in. In those days too you could still make your special deals. Non-board stuff, somebody who would be keeping track would make sure you got your cars. Like, some grades of oats, certain grades of wheat, barley, there was rye at the time. They weren't into canola, called it rapeseed, not as much at that time. We were just starting to get into all that stuff. But yeah, you always, you wanted to track your cars. We--.

NP: Did you have connections with the railway?

RO: There were guys you talked to at the railways, yeah. They're all probably retired too. They were good. It was, well, they all got kind of--. You sort of had to get along because you all worked together in a way, you know? The railways wanted those cars unloaded and going back out west too.

NP: Challenges in that side of it?

RO: Sometimes, sure. There could be a derailment or cars are late. So a lot of it, near the end when I retired, a lot of it was timing. A boat would be coming in, and he would be almost--. What do they call that when you're making cars on--? I forget the term, you know, when the parts have to be there all on time. It's sort of like that. It has to be coordinated. You get the grain in--.

NP: The just-in-time--.

RO: Just-in-time, a lot of it, because then it doesn't tie up your bin space even. You just put it right on the boat. You're checking it pretty close, mind you, because--. That's the inspector's job then to make sure that the quality is there, so. You have the two inspectors. You probably know that anyway. The companies always had theirs and the government had theirs.

NP: Did you have any connection with that part, the inspection?

RO: Oh, yeah. There were times when you'd get the odd--. Especially when I worked down in the elevator, you'd have to go and check, and sometimes you'd find out about a car because somebody out west was already checking on it, checking on their car. And it's worth a lot of money, you know. The price of grain goes up and down, but it's still worth a lot of money, so.

NP: So do you remember any of the costs of a boxcar full of grain? Does that--.

RO: Eh, not really.

NP: Recognizing that it fluctuated, obviously.

RO: It was \$4 a bushel. You could have--. How many bushels could they get on a car? I'm trying to--. Jeez, that's a long time ago. You could get a couple thousand bushels on a car, so yeah, it would be worth a lot of money. \$8, 9, 10,000 at least. Or probably more. [Laughs]

NP: Yes.

RO: Yeah. Because right now it's tonnes, and they have the big cars now. I don't know if they can hold 90-100 tonnes.

NP: I recall doing a writing seminar for grain elevator employees who wrote up the reports of discrepancies such as the grain car, and sometimes the information was just so sketchy that it wasn't too useful.

RO: Oh, yeah.

NP: And to talk to them and say, “This is what is needed, and this is why,” and to be able to say that “That boxcar, somebody has to take the loss for it, and it’s a substantial amount, so your reports have to be a little bit more detailed.”

RO: Yeah, if it comes in as a certain grade, and you start unloading and find out it isn’t, or a whole bunch of other things are mixed, you have to be pretty careful. That’s where the inspectors do a good job, and they have to communicate it right away to the guys loading to know where to put it.

NP: So you had said you had how many elevators at the sort of height of ownership?

RO: I think it was at least 11, 11 or 12 of them. There was a lot of them.

NP: I want to come back and ask what you remember which ones they were and anything about which ones came onstream when, but before I leave the inspection piece, was there a head inspector for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool then, and was that person stationed at your office? Or--?

RO: No, not when I started. The inspector at the elevator, there was always the chief inspector. He was the boss. Well, he was not the boss. There was still the superintendent, but he was the boss of inspection.

[0:25:05]

NP: And where would he have been located, at what elevator?

RO: All of them. Every elevator has them.

NP: Had their chief inspector?

RO: Yeah. The guy that was responsible.

NP: But no supervisor of all the inspectors?

RO: They had a position in Winnipeg. That was for a lot of non-board stuff. No, but each elevator had an inspector, and they all had to be facing north. I don't know if you've ever gone down to the elevators. There's no office usually on this side. They're all on that side.

NP: They're all on the north side? Okay, this is news to me. Tell me about that.

RO: Well, I took a course in it. You can see--. It's the light. I guess it gives you a truer light, apparently, facing north. [Laughs] So that's--. I never knew that until I got in. Well, I sort of knew that years ago before I even got to the elevators, but still, it was interesting.

NP: Yeah. So the elevator inspection area, then, was deliberately designed to face in a certain direction?

RO: Yeah.

NP: Hm!

RO: If you ever run across an inspector, you can double check that, but that's what I was told, and sure enough, all ours-. Pool 4 was the same way. Pool 6, Pool 7A and 7B, they're all like that.

NP: Huh! That's new information.

RO: Yeah?

NP: I don't want to lose track of your history, so maybe just run through. We had you as clerk, then you moved onto shipping. Any other responsibility changes through that 30-some years?

RO: Well, then I got to be kind of the supervisor of the grain accounting. They called me grain something-or-other. Grain accountant. That's what they called me, yeah. [Laughing] Grain accountant. That was interesting.

NP: And what does a grain accountant do?

RO: Well, you've got to make sure all of the information gets out and gets in and all that stuff, and people are getting the information, so. You know, it's a pretty big operation. A lot of it's automated even more now than when I left, I would assume.

NP: Yeah. So what's important about that? So what? Paper pushing, people will say. [Laughs] What happens if you weren't pushing your paper?

RO: Well, if they didn't keep track of what was coming in and going out, they'd be in great difficulty, because I don't know if anybody has explained audits to you.

NP: No, actually.

RO: Because you have a--. I think by the mandate of the Grain Commission, I'm trying to think if it's every two years. There's a time limit. It's no more than three, and you have to have an audit. And what that is is all the stuff that's come in and all the stuff that's gone out and all the interactions in between, you come to a final balance. This is what you're supposed to have in the elevators. So then you shut your elevator down for, usually, it took a week or two. Shut it right down. You could do some shipping after, once you had something audited and it was officially--. The government signed off on it. You could do that. But what happened was there'd be a value on all that stuff on the closing balance after all this two and half years. And if you had overages, you tried to always have overages in the higher grades because they're worth more. You take any shortages in the lower grades. So at the end of the day, there'd be accounting down, and normally, I'd say in all my experience, they were very, very rarely did an elevator lose money on an audit. They always made money.

NP: So we have to step back even a little bit further than that because, remember, people listening to this will not know, first of all, why audits came about.

RO: I'm not sure, but it's like any business. It doesn't matter. I'm sure anybody out there that, once they realize--. Every business has to have one day of reckoning a year to see where you're at, and just the elevator, just the timeframe was different.

NP: So if I'm interpreting you properly—and tell me if I'm not—all this accounting work, the paperwork that was done, this was actually to see if the physical stocks actually matched up with the--.

RO: That's correct.

NP: Okay. Now, why would it be important to have your overages--. First of all, how did an overage occur? And secondly, why was it to your advantage to have overages in the higher grades?

RO: In the higher grades. Well, they were worth more money. It's simple dollars and cents.

NP: So explain an overage. I mean, it's obviously just so ingrained in you, but to me, what is an overage?

[0:30:03]

RO: Well, there's percentages. Every car that comes in, you're allowed so much for a loss just through handling.

NP: Like the grain falls off the belt?

RO: Or something happens.

NP: Okay.

RO: And there's also screenings, don't forget, too that the--. A car comes in, and it's uncleaned, so they figure after it's cleaned, run through the cleaners, there's going to be some loss. So when the inspector looks at it, they assign a percentage of screenings, say, two percent. Then you're also allowed a very small percentage for just loss. So the screenings comes from your cleaning process, which then gets--. They were grinding them into pellets when I left. If a guy was a good operator--. [Laughs] I shouldn't say this.

NP: We'll get to that. [Laughs]

RO: They could put some back into the grain. It's how well you run your elevator, really, what it's all about. And don't forget, there's drying, there's blending, there's de-stoning. Grain comes in with lots of stuff in it, so it all has to get taken out before it's shipped.

NP: So you get a certain percentage that's assumed--.

RO: That you're going to lose.

NP: That you will lose. Okay. So move along then with how that eventually leads to an overage or a--.

RO: Or a shortage? [Laughs]

NP: Shortage, yeah.

RO: Well, the foreman and the people who run the elevator are pretty sharp. They know what to blend back into grain going on a boat. So you're taking a certain grade, and you're allowed a little certain percentage to play with. So they would hit it pretty close to the mark. That's where the inspector's always watching too. Don't forget, the government guy is watching too. He's making sure you're not cheating. But it's how efficient your elevator actually operates. That's where you get your overages from.

NP: Now, why is it better--. Again, here's what I'm hearing. Tell me if I'm wrong. That when you have an overage, that means that there's more left in your elevator than the paperwork would show because perhaps the calculations which were percentages weren't exactly on.

RO: Well--.

NP: In reality.

RO: In reality. But actually, what it is is the percentages you're allowed, the elevator operator does some things with them and gets some of it back into the grain. Not all of it. It's just some.

NP: So now, assuming it's an overage, how does the grade play into this? Why was the--? [Telephone rings] **[Audio pauses]** Well, I'll ask the question that way.

RO: Sure.

NP: Just coming back then to the overage. As you started talking about it and having extra grain in the bins, it reminded me of another interview that was done. And it was my understanding that from the Canadian Grain Commission's [CGC] perspective, then, they weren't too happy to see overages especially in high grades because it might have indicated that there was a little bit too much of the blending going on, which was to the advantage of the company as opposed to the advantage of the farmer who was paid at a certain grade. So can you comment on that?

RO: Well, it all depends what side of the fence you're on because a company, too, is there to make money, and they're still meeting all the criteria for exporting the grain or whatever the criteria you have to meet. So in my way of thinking, if they're doing that, and they can get an overage, they're just running a very efficient operation. Nowadays, because—don't forget, it's changed over the

years—Viterra now is a public company--. Well, it always was that. It was a co-op even in those days, and the farmers were shareholders in that. So they got some money back too. So if the company made money, it was better for them, and even now more so because they're shareholders, actually shares and they're valued. I think it just, to my way of thinking, it's they're just running a very efficient operation. And I know the Wheat Board and the Grain Commission because they have to pay for it, they don't want to pay for it. [Laughs] But that's the way it goes.

NP: When they do an audit then under the Canadian Grain Act, was there a point then where the overage was just too much, and that there were some penalties involved? Did that ever happen, or did they just look at you and say, "Hm"?

[0:35:17]

RO: Well, the elevator operators are also pretty smart. They come along and see we're way too high in one, they'll just drop some down a bit, stagger the overages over other grades. They're not going to--. They were never stupid enough to wave a big red flag.

NP: So when you say weigh the overages over the other grades, so they actually take the physical grain and put it in the lower grain bin? Or was that a paperwork--?

RO: Yeah, they can do that. Yeah.

NP: But what did they actually do? Was that a paperwork change, or was that--?

RO: Well, if you're running and your paperwork is correct, you should know before the actual--. You see, once they start the actual audit, they seal all the bins. So what you do is before you start looking at this. You should have a pretty good idea of where you're at. You know, you're not going to be right on with every last bushel or tonne, but you know, and you'll start moving around before they seal the bins. So they're just efficient that way. What can you say! [Laughing]

NP: A little cat and mouse game, but everybody knows what's going on, right?

RO: Well, that's true. Probably a lot of other organizations do this.

NP: Yeah.

RO: But that's one thing to me that's interesting because Canada, don't forget, ships--. They guarantee the quality, so they've been very good at it because Canada still has a high reputation for grain. And other products too, the barley and all that stuff.

NP: Shortages then, what causes that and what implications, if any?

RO: Well, shortages actually, in some of the crops—I can remember like rapeseed or mustard and that—they're so small, jeez, you lose them a bit. [Laughs] You don't want to, but it costs you money too. Shortages can be caused by blending and stuff. But sometimes you can have a shortage in something. Just something happens, that's all. It gets lost or something or got put in the wrong bin and shouldn't be there, stuff like that, because you go in an elevator, it's a pretty big operation. Some of these things like 7A, they've got bins all over and belts running here, there, and everywhere.

NP: I think it would be rather suspicious if everything balanced out.

RO: Yeah. [Laughing] Over the years, I think it would be almost impossible when you're working with it. If you know grain, it would be almost impossible. It's true of everything, I guess. I don't think anybody when they're doing inventories is right on. No, it's always been an interesting part of the grain business.

NP: Mmhmm. On the surface, it doesn't sound too interesting, does it? But I find that these things that we think aren't interesting, they're really, they're very complex, necessary.

RO: Yeah. When I left, at least once a week they would do a rough physical inventory—very rough physical inventory—and see how it compared to what they were supposed to have, because you have to keep track of it. It's worth money, so.

NP: Earlier on, you said about the number of elevators, and you also made a comment about good elevator operators, like the managers or the superintendents, whatever their names were. So let's talk about the growth or the changes in the elevators that were in the inventory of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool that you recall. Did you recall what there was when you first started and the changes that occurred? I mean, that's a pretty major request in a question, but--.

RO: Well, there was Pool 4. I'm trying to remember. Pool 5, Pool 6, Pool 7, and Pool 8. I think that was it when I first started. So then they took over a couple of companies, and then they got into the ones in the water up the river. I think one of them is still operating. In fact, two of them are. One was Pool 15. That was run by--. Ah, I forget the name of that outfit—Inter-Lakes or something. It's a--.

NP: Inter-Ocean? No?

RO: No, it's--.

NP: Or the Western Grain?

RO: No, that's not--. Anyways, whatever the name is now, Pool 15.

NP: Mission Terminals?

RO: It used to be over there in the Mission. Pool 15 used to be a Searle Elevator. Searle 15.

NP: Yes. That's Mission Terminals now.

RO: Yeah. There was Pool 10, Pool 11, Pool 12, Pool 14, Pool 15. So there was quite a few.

NP: Okay. So one of the goals of our project is actually get all these names and numbers straight. [Laughs] So let's start with the Current River group.

[0:40:15]

RO: That was 4A and 4B. Pool 4, well, it's empty now. It's a big elevator too. It was very big. Then there was Pool 6, which is now down. We still have the office building there, though.

NP: Remind me to come back and ask you about how you felt about the taking out of Pool 6. So we have Pool 6, and then we're into the Intercity.

RO: Then you have 7A and 7B were Sask Pool. And then there was Pool 8 on the Kam River. I don't think we had a Pool 9. I'm trying to remember. Somebody else had a 9, I think.

NP: Alberta.

RO: Yeah. Pool 10 was--. Then 10, 11, and 12, I think, were all Searle Elevators. They bought Searle out. I'm trying to think if there was another one. I know there was a pile of them. Oh, yeah. There was 14, 15. Yeah.

NP: And what were 14 and 15?

RO: I think they were the Searles too. 14, 15, 11, and 10. I think there was four elevators they got. I think one was called Empire somewhere. Now, that's been--. 10's been taken down, I know.

NP: Empire was at the mouth of the Kam. It burned down.

RO: Yeah, probably that's what happened to that one.

NP: Westland D, which was on the corner--. Pool 8 was Ogilive's.

RO: Yeah, and Sask Pool took that over.

NP: Mmhmm. And then there was one just around the bend, which is Westland D.

RO: I'm not sure if that's the one we called 11. Like, we gave them all numbers after.

NP: Yeah. What's the best way to find out what your numbers were? Who did you have to register your numbers with, the Grain Commission?

RO: Probably. You know, probably the tax historian in the city because you'd have to register them with the city because they charge a lot of taxes for all of this. I'm sure they have records of all of them, even now what's left. They'll even know the ones that are abandoned. Somebody owns them, or they're going to get taken over, probably, taken over by the city because it costs you a small fortune to knock them down.

NP: Now, when you talked about there were just a few when you started and then Sask Wheat Pool ended up taking over others, during your career, then, did you also see the reverse of that?

RO: Oh, yeah. Yeah. We started shutting them down.

NP: Do you recall anything about the shutdowns? Did that have implications on the work that you did?

RO: Oh, yeah. I mean, after a while, you need a little less staff and everything the less elevators to worry about. I think what happened over the years, the elevators got more efficient, so you needed less of them. Like, I think 7A especially, I don't think there's anybody in the world that can operate as--. If they're going full blast, nobody's as efficient as they are.

NP: What do you think leads to that?

RO: It was well designed originally, and they've just kept improving things.

NP: Do you know if that was a C. D. Howe designed elevator?

RO: Yeah. As far as I know, for sure it was. Yeah.

NP: Before I forget to ask, what happened to all of the office records here, do you know?

RO: [Laughs] That I don't know. I know legally they have to keep some for a while, but some of the grain accounting and personnel stuff, I'm not sure. I know they were microfiche-ing them for a while.

NP: Okay. That's good news.

RO: So they could be somewhere.

NP: Might have gone to head office in Saskatchewan?

RO: Could be. Or there still could be storage here somewhere.

NP: Anybody I can contact who--?

RO: I'm not sure.

NP: Oh, I guess the Viterra people. If anybody would know, they would know.

RO: Have you contacted them yet? They might be willing to talk to you. It's kind of a--. You know, the company has turned around. It's kind of a good news story now because they've expanded. Some people maybe think they're too big. I think they've taken over an elevator in Montreal now too. They did something with Australia, if I remember correctly. I follow it a bit, but not that much.

NP: Just can't help yourself! [Laughs]

RO: Well, you tend to run across people you work with. That's about the only time you really talk about it. But for the city of Thunder Bay, I hope it hangs in because it still is--. They pay pretty good taxes yet, and if you know grain, it wears things out. So we don't have near the suppliers we used to, I don't think, but they need people to come in and do jobs. It helps the economy. Plus, I mean, you need guys on the railroad, boat people, government people, grain trimmers, all that stuff.

[0:45:07]

NP: Yes. And at one time, it was really—especially before computers and when, as you said, we were the biggest grain port—that really led to the development of the cities.

RO: Another big change too is when they started getting rid of boxcars. It made it far more efficient to just bring the hoppers in, just open up the hatch down below there, and out it came. They have that automated now. I don't know if you've ever seen it. A guy sits there. [Laughs] It's pretty neat, actually.

NP: I think of it as a big screwdriver. [Laughs]

RO: Yeah, but it's really changed things. You used to have a lot of guys that used to break the boxcar doors. I don't know if you've ever seen them, but that was back a long time. Some of that stuff was kind of dangerous to work in too. Then you'd have to get it out. You'd have these big--. I don't what they were called. Something on a cable and pull the grain out, then they'd shovel the rest out. You know, it was a lot of manual labour at one time, which is now gone.

NP: More dangerous, I would think, too.

RO: At that time, yeah.

NP: Yeah. So from your position sitting in the main administrative office, what were the labour issues or the safety issues, things such as that, that were occurring and that you saw change over time?

RO: Well, they started to really stress safety a lot more, and there used to be--. [Laughs] I think they drank in the elevators at one time, all of them, the whole kit and kaboodle—not just Sask Pool guys, the government guys, everybody. They did stop all that stuff. When I left too they stopped smoking in the elevators for quite a while. You obviously heard what happened in Kansas City. You don't forget that stuff. It's powerful.

NP: You're referring to the Kansas City explosion of just a couple of days ago.

RO: Yeah, that's grain dust, same thing we have here. But I think Canada and here, you don't see it anymore. You used to see all that stuff coming out. It's pretty well handled now.

NP: So from your perch on the north side of the city, you could see the grain dust when they were loading?

RO: Grain dust, yeah. But now you don't see it near as much. Out of a boat it'll come a bit. There's not much you can do about it. But that's not as bad because, don't forget, most of that grain—well, all of it—is supposed to be clean going in there, but you're still going to get some dust. So they do a good job. And recovering that stuff inside is--. I'm sure they're still doing pellets.

NP: They didn't always do pellets.

RO: No. They used to ship the screenings out west, from what I remember. But then they decided it was far more efficient just to do it here. It was good for animal feed, high in protein. The local guys used to buy it here too, so. Vanderwees for chickens. [Laughs] I'm trying to think of some of the other guys that bought it too.

NP: Well, I think Mr. Mailhot said his dad started out doing that as--.

RO: Oh, yeah. Gene used to come by, and he'd be looking for grain that was a little off or something wrong. We'd have a hard time blending it or doing anything with it, because sometimes stuff got into it. So the local guys--.

NP: Stuff being--?

RO: Well, I don't know. Excreta, they called it. Poop stuff or maybe some chemical or something got into it. But he used to be pretty good at buying that stuff pretty cheap and recovering some of it, so. I think they're still going, Mailhots.

NP: Mmhmm.

RO: He always used to drop by the office. Yeah.

NP: Shrewd man?

RO: Pretty shrewd. Yeah. They all were. Vanderwees were pretty sharp guys too, and they would buy the odd grain car as well. They'd unload it themselves.

NP: You had mentioned the intelligence of the elevator managers. So if you could give us a picture of what you think the ideal elevator manager, what would be the talent, abilities of--?

RO: Well, trusting the people below him because I always say the elevator manager, it's everybody else down below them that are pretty sharp--the inspector, the guys that transfer the bins around and make sure they didn't make mistakes, all that kind of--. They all worked together. He has to, you know--. He doesn't sit in his office when all this is happening. What he's saying, he has to trust those people. And a lot of it was just through experience.

NP: So you worked with a number of those managers over time. Are there some that stand out in your mind as being, just, they broke the mold when they made that person--like super. I'm sure they could not all have gotten to where they got without abilities, but some--.

[0:50:19]

RO: No, they were all pretty good. They had experience. Most of my career, about 30 years of it, was in the office before I got into the elevator, so to be truthful, for me to judge them would be a little unfair because working in the office, I didn't really work with them down at the elevators. You would have to talk to guys who actually worked with them. You know, when they come up, they'd have meetings in the office. You'd talk to them about certain things, but it wasn't actually running the elevator talking to him about it. You'd have to ask the guys who worked for them. I'm sure there were some that were better than others.

NP: Were there legends, ones that, even before your time, were there ones that were legends? I'm asking this question because names come up regularly.

RO: There were guys that were--. George McMackin was there for a long time as a superintendent. Donny White. I'm trying to think of some other names. What's his name? He's still around. [Laughs] It's hard to remember names from years ago, you know?

NP: Oh. [Laughs] I appreciate that, and I'm amazed that you can remember any of them.

RO: Oh, well, some are still around. Ed Hill's still around. He's not working now. What was the guy down at Pool 15? It might come to me. Doug Asif, Asif, Asif--Doug Asquith is still around. In fact, I seen him the other day and said hello. So a lot of them are still around.

NP: Mmhhh. Well, I'll get those names from you at the end of the interview, and I'll call some of them and see if they're interested in adding their stories.

RO: Yeah, some of the younger foremen, if I can remember their names, just retired in the last five to ten years would probably be good to talk to. They'd give you a perspective of what's going on now, so. Some--. What should I say? Some who were forced to retire early may not be too happy. Well, I also got bought out early too, so.

NP: Yeah, depended how close you were to retiring anyway.

RO: Yeah, but they treated everybody pretty fair. Some people can always say, "I wasn't quite treated fairly enough," but a lot better than a lot of companies you see. I'll tell you that.

NP: So the downsizing, then, from the high of, what, about 11? How many elevators did you say?

RO: Probably around 11 of them, yeah.

NP: Yeah. And then I assume it's the Kam River group that started to shut down first.

RO: They were the first ones to start going, yeah.

NP: Do you know what went into decisions about which ones went and which ones stayed? Was that strictly physical access to the elevators?

RO: Oh, partly. How efficient they were. I mean, 7A could do a lot of the stuff, so a lot of it went there. Pool 4 at one time too. You see, for a while, Sask Pool was just 7A and 7B. They did lots of stuff. Now, I understand that they have one in Current River that does some special boards. They call it Viterra C now, I think. So with the Wheat Board changing, that--. People, you know, they look at some of this political stuff going on, but I even talked to a current foreman now for Sask Pool and figures it will really help Thunder Bay, the Wheat Board going, because if you're efficient, even I was there, you were competing for grain contracts, so you would have to try and watch your costs. Every couple of cents, even a tonne would make a difference. So they figure it will help Thunder Bay, so let's hope.

NP: Do you see a possible negative? A less positive outlook from your experience of what could go wrong?

RO: Not really. I think Churchill was propped up by a lot of subsidies for a long time. They still might get some grain, but don't forget, the companies own these elevators. Sask Pool's still here, Parrish & Heimbecker. In fact, they just had an interview on the radio with one of the--. It was either a Heimbecker or a Parrish, I forget. [Laughs]

NP: John, John Heimbecker, who's in town for a board meeting with the Port Authority.

RO: And you still have Cargill and Richardson's, and they tend to own country elevators out west. For them, if you can get the contract, then you're controlling it from the country elevator to the elevator and out. So they make more money that way. And it's also more efficient too. So I think that's what's going to happen is they'll compete for contracts. So the farmer will make his choice, and they're pretty sharp now too these guys. I mean, I wouldn't sit back and have an image of a farmer just sitting around. Those guys are into computers and accounting and all this kind of stuff. They're pretty sharp marketers.

[0:55:34]

NP: Aren't they a little limited by the fact that now, with so few country elevators, they have to deliver to whoever is close? Do you really get a choice? [Laughs]

RO: Probably. They probably still have some choice out there, yeah, but what can you do? That's the way it went. Yeah, that was also when I started working, we used to have to figure out the costs for the grain coming in, going back in the early '60s. I don't

know how many country elevators there were, probably thousands of them out west. So I'm not sure what it's down to now. But those country elevators, the new big cement ones, are pretty efficient too.

NP: Mmhmm. No, I certainly agree with you there, it's just that there's not as many of them so there's--.

RO: I know what you're saying, yeah. Yeah. And it affected some of the small country towns. In fact, the company used to—I think it was twice that I remember—would take staff out west, and they would give us a tour of head office and country elevators and livestock yards. At that time, I'm not sure if Sask Pool is still into it, they had a livestock division and everything. They were into everything. I'm not sure if they've cut back because they're just concentrating on grain. I know they've got the new big boss, and I think he's still there, Mayo Schmidt. I don't know if you've heard that name.

NP: Mmhmm.

RO: Hired him from the States. Pretty aggressive guy. So he's--. [Laughs] Viterra's done well, or Sask Pool has done well by him. I guess Viterra.

NP: Mmhmm.

RO: And everybody might not agree with him, but he was a pretty tough guy, and he knew where they wanted to go.

NP: I keep coming back to continuing the thread. So I think we left you in the position of the grain accounting. And did your career change at all after that, or is that how you--?

RO: That's when I retired, as the grain accountant. But it changed to a different degree when we moved right down to the elevators because you're right there where the action is.

NP: So tell me about that then.

RO: That was, well, you got to meet everybody, and you're right there, and if you wanted a question--. Sometimes somebody phoned you from out west, "How's this car? Where is it?" Two ways of doing it, you could phone the railway, but we had a computer system where sometimes you could check where the cars were, or whole trains in fact. Or something about the grade of a car, you could walk around and talk to the inspector.

NP: So even though you were probably—for those people listening to this tape who don't know Thunder Bay—even though you were a five-minute car ride, probably, from head office to Pool 7 office building, just not being physically located in the same place made a difference.

RO: Yeah, that's true. It did. You still did kind of the same stuff when you moved into the elevators, but it was different working with the people. And the Grain Commission guy was there. You could go talk to them. Or if you wanted to do a dryer lot, you went down and took them the information, so it was right there. All that kind of stuff.

NP: Did you like it better, personally?

RO: Oh, yeah.

NP: Yeah?

RO: After a while, yeah. It was different.

NP: Change was initially--.

RO: Oh, yeah. You had to wear your hardhat going around inside the elevator, and you had to wear boots and stuff like that, but it was interesting. And you met the guys, you know? They're all pretty good guys. Lots of women, surprisingly down there too, you know, especially with the Grain Commission.

NP: Starting in the '70s, I think, yeah.

RO: Yeah. Matter of fact, I think there's at least one supervisor that I know of now that's a female for Sask Pool. I keep calling it Sask Pool-Viterra.

NP: [Laughs] So did bringing into that part of the workforce—because you mentioned in the administrative side they were there—do you think it had any impact other than on giving women good paychecks, well-paying jobs? [Laughs] Did it have any impact on the ethic?

RO: It probably cut down some of the swearing and stuff. [Laughs] I don't know. Well--.

NP: Had the drinking already stopped, or was that also part of it?

RO: No, that had stopped long--. That stopped quite a few years ago.

NP: You are not alone in mentioning the drinking.

RO: But up in the office there, we never really heard about it, but it was--. God, I don't know how many years ago that was. Quite a while. Just as well because it's a dangerous place.

[1:00:04]

NP: Yeah. And how do you think that--? Like, something like that doesn't just change overnight. What caused it?

RO: I think one of the Sask Pool employees got drowned or something--drunk and fell in the slip. Anyways, once that was out, that was it. It was started to drop anyways. People were getting smarter and stuff like that. And the next thing to go was the smoking. They used to have designated smoking areas, from what I was told, so that went too, because, you know, really, guys--. A lot of those guys worked there years when there was a lot more dust around, and I wonder a lot of them smoked for their lungs. A lot of them survived for years, though. It's amazing. Now, it's a lot better workplace too.

NP: A lot cleaner.

RO: Well, it's clean. Well, you have to keep them clean. They come by and check every so often too. I'm sure the government still does it. They don't want a dirty elevator. You know, it's never going to be immaculate, let's face it. It's grain flying around. But you don't want it to be built up in places.

NP: So in the elevators that were along the Thunder Bay waterfront, were there better housekeepers than others?

RO: Oh, probably.

NP: Not that you noticed, though?

RO: Well--.

NP: I mean, I'm not going to ask you to identify who they were, but just was there a different standard, or was there a corporate standard? [Laughs]

RO: Well, I think it was a pretty standard standard. I'll put it that way. I think most people knew to keep your elevator safe, too, you've got to control the dust and all that kind of stuff. You can't have stuff laying around either. It just attracts mice and all that kind of stuff you don't want, or pigeons and all that kind of stuff.

NP: So when--. We're approaching the end of your career then. This is when things were really starting to change from a corporate structure standpoint and who owned what. What was it like to be working at that time when it was a massive change?

RO: The change when I was there from a co-op into shareholders. Like, I never did buy shares in Sask Pool because I was getting--. I knew. I had been there 30-something years, and I wasn't going to put my money into it then. It started to change then. Even though it was a co-op, it had been changing over the years anyways, getting more or less of a co-op and more like a business entity.

NP: Was this when they--. You had mentioned the fellow, Mr. Schmidt, who had been brought in. So was that coincide with his takeover?

RO: No, I think what happened is he can come in, but he has to be given a mandate like any other CEO. So I think the board of directors just knew the handwriting on the walls, and I think they wanted to keep it a Canadian company. That's part of it too. People should remember that Sask Pool is still entirely Canadian. Or Viterra. [Laughs] I keep calling it Sask Pool. So I think he was brought in. They knew they had to change to change with the times. He come in, and he had a vision. Not everybody probably liked it. Maybe some of the workers. Maybe I didn't. Maybe I got retired early because of it. Who knows! [Laughs] But anyways, he came in, and he's changed the company. He outbid Richardson's for UGG [United Grain Growers] and all that stuff, and he's still going, bought an elevator in Montreal. Sometimes it's unfortunate. These smaller companies have a tougher time. You've got to get bigger. And the Americans, don't forget, I think they were eyeing Canada too. Cargill's already in, so they're pretty big too.

NP: And that's an issue now that people are saying with the Wheat Board that the big multinationals such as the Arthur--. I never get the--. Daniels Midland. I'm not sure if that's the order of the names, and the Bunges, and--.

RO: And there's Continental. Continental's another big one.

NP: Yeah.

RO: But I think Canada's well positioned now. There was nothing to-- Well, I'm not sure the Wheat Board-- It was going to change. You just can't keep it that way, I don't think, because I think Canada has changed a lot, and I think the farmers—I could be wrong—but I think they're more entrepreneurial than they used to be—sharper younger people. You know, it's a big investment, so there's always been-- Like they had a demonstration at Winnipeg. I watched one of the news things. The farmers were really upset. Where were the tractors and where were the huge mobs? I think the Wheat Board's still not going to disappear. They just have to compete for the grain, that's' all, instead of them having a monopoly on it. Supposedly it will help Thunder Bay. Some people might not like it, some, for want of a better word, left-wingers might say, "Well, you know--" I went to school. Maybe sometimes less government's a little better. Won't stand in the way.

[1:05:36]

NP: As one headline in either the *Western Producer* or the *Manitoba Cooperator* said, "One thing that all sides can agree on it will be interesting times."

RO: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. Is the *Western Producer* still going? I haven't seen it. See, I think that's still run by a division of Sask Pool. Used to be.

NP: Not sure.

RO: *Manitoba Cooperator*, even though there's no Manitoba Pool, I guess it's still going as well.

NP: Yeah. Just like the grain elevator companies, there's been buyouts and whatever in the journalism side as things changed. I guess the—well, I know—the UGG-Manitoba Pool amalgamation/takeover occurred prior to--

RO: Yeah.

NP: Did that have any impact on Sask Wheat Pool on the Thunder Bay waterfront?

RO: Oh, I'm sure there was less people working then. They would have downsized too. You used to—excuse me—used to have contact with people in the other grain elevator offices too. Like when I worked downtown Port Arthur, Manitoba Pool had their office around the corner and UGG was down the street. And sometimes you went there and-- We had dealings with other companies too, you know, period--

NP: Such as?

RO: Well, sometimes they couldn't handle some grain. You'd take their cars in. Stuff like that. Or you happened to unload one of their cars in error, which can happen too. "What do you want done with this?" It was really valuable. Sometimes they'd ask it back, or you'd just do a trade off. There was a lot of cooperation. The Lakehead Terminal Elevators Association, all the companies worked together to--. They always looked after their own interests, mind you, but they all worked together too, and they always watched their percentages. They all knew who was getting X-number percent of cars. Probably still is like that, although there would be a lot less people at the table, because you do need some coordination too. It helps the railways, I assume, too in order to put the cars instead of going helter-skelter. "Who's got the room?" And all that stuff.

NP: You've talked about some of the changes that occurred over your time, but one you just referred to that I'm sure had a big impact, but you didn't dwell on. Two things—one is metric. You were there for that change.

RO: Yeah. For a while, you had to--. I don't know if they still do it. The farmers out west were stubborn. They weren't going to change. So you'd come in here, and it would be bushels, and you would have to convert it to metric. Or sometimes they wanted information back out west for a farmer, and you'd have to convert it from metric to bushels. So it was quite a--. Well, it was another mathematical thing you had to work on it.

NP: Was it a real headache to bring in, and was the headache worth it?

RO: I don't know.

NP: From your perspective. Like, from the work you did, did it make your life eventually easier once the change--?

RO: It probably did. A tonne, like, is 2,000—what is it—2,204.6-something tonnes. How did that work again? 2,204 pounds per tonne. It wasn't quite the 2,000. And the bushels, it made it easier because it was a bigger unit. We used to talk in millions of bushels and millions of things. Now you're talking thousands of tonnes. Well, you know, right now we would handle--. Last time I was talking to one of the guys, I think Sask Pool did something like close to 2 million tonnes, but if you were to convert that back into bushels, that's a lot of bushels. In a way, it made it easier. It was just that transition for a while because everybody was—even the guys in the elevators, the inspectors, everybody—worked in bushels for so long.

NP: I did talk to the fellow who was brought into the Canadian Grain Commission to lead the change to metric including all of the equipment. The scales had to be changed and so on. And another fellow who was with the Wheat Board, and he said there was

some number of calculations that had to be done from the farm gate through to delivery overseas, and it was something like 20 different calculations because they weren't using all the same system. So he said that if you took a look at the entire system, it really--.

[1:10:32]

RO: Streamlined it.

NP: Streamlined it. But everybody's working their own little piece, and that didn't necessarily make life easier for them.

RO: See, I'd be curious now whether the farmers--. They must be into tonnes now too. I think everything is that way, but for a while, they were in bushels. Americans still use bushels. It's crazy. Well, we're still using 2x4s, 2x6s, which I still do. I still don't know metric--. Doesn't mean anything for those kinds of measurements to me. But it's streamlined. That was another thing that streamlined it too. And in fact, I don't even think Sask Pool has a Winnipeg office anymore outside of a couple of traders that go to the--. What do they call the market, the board?

NP: The Grain Exchange. Well, no. The Commodities Exchange.

RO: Yeah.

NP: And that is now all just a computer.

RO: See, because of electronics, you can go back and forth through Regina then. So I think some of the people that I used to work with or knew in Winnipeg—well, I worked with them too—we would go up to their office, sometimes they'd come down to ours, have either retired or gone to Regina.

NP: That leads to the next change that I would think would have made quite a difference, and that's computerization, which you were also present for.

RO: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

NP: So tell me about the--.

RO: Well, it took a while to get used to it. It had some flaws at the beginning, but in the long run, it made things very efficient, a lot easier.

NP: So in your day to day work, then, what would you say were the results of the computerization changes? What--?

RO: Well, for example, a car came in, you used to have to figure it out. Now, it just comes in, the scale does it, and *boom!* It ends up on the stock sheet. And communications have got to be 1000 times better than it used to be. They go directly to Regina, and you can call up stuff very quickly, get an answer. You can check on cars a lot easier. I assume it's even better than when I was there. You know, you'd phone up, and they had systems where you could actually see where the cars actually were. Because, you know, we used to have, like I said, time of delivery and all that. You'd get a train of barley coming, and you'd get a boat, and you want to get it there, so. Or you knew a boat was coming in especially for off-board stuff, like canola or mustard. When I left, we were doing canola, mustard, fava beans, probably missing some. [Laughs] What's the other ones? Lentils. You name it, we were doing all of it. You have to have a big elevator to do that though, see. That's why I think if it really picks up here that one in Current River will be a lot busier for Viterra because it doesn't tie up your whole elevator at times. But everything was just--. It makes it more efficient, easier to communicate. All the calculations are done, and you just have to make sure that everything is right. So the boats were automatic too after awhile off the scales.

NP: Did that lead to downsizing of office staff when the computers came in?

RO: Oh, yeah. All that stuff. Yeah, everybody got downsized. So it just--. I'm not even sure how many office staff they have left there anymore. It was just the sign of the times. It was happening all over. But I think every so often, they do a check just to make sure everything's going because, after explaining the audits, you don't want to make sure anything's amiss.

NP: Were you able, for the work that you did, were you able to link in directly to the head office computers for--?

RO: At that time, it wasn't the head office. It was Winnipeg. Yeah, we could go in or they could come to us. It was getting even more so when I left, then they made the decision to close Winnipeg, so I guess they go directly to Regina. And you could link into the--. You know, you made deals with the railways, and you could link into their system too. All that stuff helped.

NP: You can mention names if you know them but more the position. What position were you communicating with with the railways? Like, if I was looking for a contact on the railway side--.

[1:15:08]

RO: Jeez, I've forgotten her name. Well, I'd phone. It was also the guy who controlled the cars. I don't know what he would be called. He knew where the cars were. Or you'd phone up and say, "You know, I can't find this information about this car that's supposed to be coming in, or this train, where is it?" Sometimes it doesn't show it in the computer, or it's supposed to be here and it isn't here and all that stuff. So they'd do that for you. Or if they wanted some information on something that's coming in, and they have no idea--. [Laughs] Cars sometimes came in from the west. You know, there's so many cars coming in. Maybe somebody forgot to file the information, so you'd try to do them a favour and find out is this one of your cars and where is it supposed to go? All that kind of stuff. We all worked together, you know. Then there was Lake Shippers too, that kind of stuff. "How much grain do you got in there? Are you ready to take this boat?" They were all good. Like Gene Onchulenko would be a good guy to talk to.

NP: Don't you think it's fascinating? I mentioned when we first started talking that I grew up in Thunder Bay. My father was a grain inspector. All I knew was there were some elevators there.

RO: What was his last name?

NP: Marks. George Marks.

RO: The name sounds vaguely--. When did he retire? I guess a while--.

NP: He retired in '75.

RO: Might have run across him. The name sounds vaguely familiar.

NP: I'm sure. He was with Jack Lourie and Maurice, oh, Harris. In that--.

RO: I've heard of Mo Harris. See, sometimes the inspectors sometimes tended to stay in the same elevators for a while.

NP: No, my dad moved around.

RO: He moved around, eh?

NP: Yeah. I can remember that. But I knew nothing, right?

RO: Yeah.

NP: And when we're talking here, and you just finished talking about how everybody worked together, what an accomplishment.

RO: Oh, yeah. Actually, it was one of the—at that time—one of the better places to work in Thunder Bay, the grain elevators associated with it. What I mean is the railways and the boats and all that stuff. The boat guys and the grain trimmers would come in, the boat captains would come in when I was down at the elevators, and the first mate and all those people. [Laughs] And you'd see the guys coming in and off the boats.

NP: So talk more about the boats. We're a little shy on the boat side of our story, so what sticks in your mind about the ships coming in?

RO: Well, they were big. It's amazing how they can manoeuvre those things around. They were huge! [laughs] You know, 730-50 feet long. That's a big--. That's a long way. All I remember from down there, well, there was guys who got off the boats, and you'd hear stories about people going on the boats. [Laughs] I won't mention what they were doing, but you'd see the cabs coming down.

NP: Any contact names for that? [Laughing]

RO: But, you know, the sailors were kind of a fun group too, I guess. They enjoyed themselves.

NP: Are we referring to ladies of the night?

RO: Some of them probably, yes. That's what I had heard anyways. But it was interesting, boats, you know, when you had to load because they were so long. It was very--. First meeting the grain trimmers to make sure it was evenly distributed, otherwise *crrk!* Break the boat. Yeah, they were very interesting, and they knew their boats pretty well, these guys, boy, and where to put it and that kind of stuff. They'd take a lot. They would take--. What the hell can a boat take now? I don't know how many thousands of tonnes. They were huge.

NP: You must have seen change in size over your--.

RO: Well, one of the big changes was more ocean boats started to come in too, especially for special crops. You'd get them in the spring, not so much in the summer, and then this time of the year in the fall. They'd come in. The crops get built up, and then they'd go overseas. You might see more of that kind of stuff if the Wheat Board goes too. But then, the Wheat Board only controls

so much. They only control, when I was there--. What the heck were they called? [No.] 1 Northern, [No.] 2 Northern, [No.] 3 Northern, [No.] 4, Canada Red—not all of it, most of it—and some Canada feed, and that was it. All the other grades weren't. They had the soft whites, the red winters, all that kind of stuff. They didn't control that. And they controlled barley, the [No.] 2 CW, [No.] 3 CW. Malting barley. What else? A little bit of the oats.

NP: At one time, yeah.

RO: Oats was big. I don't know if it still is. Americans used to like to buy our oats. They tried shipping it down directly by rail down to the States, but that didn't work out very well.

[1:20:03]

NP: Do you know why?

RO: All quality. You see, whereas here--. They says, "We can mimic the quality." We kept pretty good quality control, so you'd get boats coming in with oats, just for oats. And you'd get the guys from Anheuser-Busch coming in for the malting barley. You'd have contracts with them, probably through the Wheat Board, I guess. But I'm not sure even the Wheat Board's into that anymore. But anyways, that was the stuff. If you went down to the States and drink some of their beer, it was all Canadian barley. And they were finnick. You talk about keeping an elevator clean. They'd bring their own guys in, and they would have a--. I'm trying to remember now. In fact, I think he works for Sask Pool now that he's out west. They had their own inspector here too looking at things. Quality was a big thing for them. All the spouted and--. I didn't quite understand it all. Canada Malt still does big business down here. You'd probably be wise to talk to them too. Different. A whole kind of different way of doing grain.

NP: Do you know about other customers? I think it was the horse trade down in the southern States who were taking a lot of the oats, which was news to me. Do you know where your other customers were coming out of the port of Thunder Bay?

RO: Well, where did the barley go? I think it just went to Superior, and then they took it down to their malting plants in the Midwest. Yeah, oats went all over the place. I bet you some even went and ended up in Kentucky, to tell you the truth, because I drove through there when we went south, and you could see all the horses around. Probably not as much now because of the recession. Well, locally too, we sold pellets to farmers who would come in. Actually, we even started getting pellets coming in. We even started getting--. That was one of the other changes. I don't know how much they're doing it now, but truckloads of grain coming in. So we had a facility that could take trucks, truckloads of grain.

NP: Which elevator? All elevators?

RO: 7A for sure. I'm not sure the other companies. But if you wanted to compete, and you had the chance to get some grain in, you probably had to have a facility.

NP: What was your connection, then, with the St. Lawrence elevators?

RO: Well, we didn't really have that much connection. The only time we ever heard something was if something was wrong with the shipment. [Laughs] That was a whole different ball game down there.

NP: In what way?

RO: Well, we really didn't have that much contact with them. I think it was the higher ups might have, but I don't think they even did. Once it was loaded on the boat, and it was inspected, it was on its way.

NP: Once you had that certificate final, everybody was happy?

RO: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And you know, I'm not sure if--. The only time, like I say, you'd hear was if something went wrong.

NP: So what could go wrong?

RO: Well, they would argue and say the quality wasn't what it was supposed to be, but you would say it was inspected and that. You know. See, what happens sometimes too, the boat doesn't just load at one elevator. It will load at sometimes two or three elevators. So you could say Sask Pool's was right on, and some other guy tried to play the game, and he didn't quite do it right. So. [Laughs]

NP: So what would happen in that case? What's the--?

RO: [Laughs] There'd be an argument, that's for sure!

NP: Court case?

RO: Well, I think they would settle it somehow. I'm not sure. Probably money gone back and forth, I'm sure. But to bring a boat back and offload it, you couldn't do that, or they'd pay a penalty.

NP: So at what level would those disputes be dealt with?

RO: I never really got involved with them.

NP: So head office?

RO: I would assume, yeah. Or even the Grain Commission. If the Grain Commission signed off on it, you know, something's happened along the way. And what they might do to satisfy the customer is say, "We'll give you another. The next boat that comes down, the quality will be a little higher than it's supposed to be." There's ways of doing it. Interesting.

NP: European, Middle Eastern, any recollection about who your customers were there?

RO: No. We just knew a lot of the durum went to the Mid-East and some to Italy, I guess. It went all over the place. Well, the one time, they had that big rush to Russia. A lot of it was going to Russia, so that's when they had called it Prairie gold. Frank Mazur was head of the union at the time. There was a couple strikes in those days and everything, so.

NP: Tell me more about that.

RO: Well, we didn't get--. We didn't go down to the elevators. But I think they were fairly short lived at the time. I think the local 650 got kind of a bad rap at the time, always going on strikes. But it's not even local 650. Another guy to talk to about—and I think he's still mixed up dealing with the Steelworkers—is Herb Daniher. I'd put his name down, or have you already got his name?

[1:25:19]

NP: He's on our committee.

RO: Oh, he's on your committee. Yeah. I knew Herb. I still see him the odd time.

NP: So why was that the time for strikes?

RO: Because they saw the supply and demand. [Laughs] They signed this massive deal with Russia, and it was all going through Thunder Bay, so. They had them, so they went and got some pretty fair raises from what I recollect in those days.

NP: What do you recall about Frank Mazur—kind of legend, from what I understand.

RO: Oh, I met him quite a few times—big, straight shooter, big guy. No, I didn't mind him. I thought he was just a straight-ahead guy, that was it, you know, believed in what he was doing. What else can you say?

NP: Actually--.

RO: He rubbed some people the wrong way, obviously, but you knew what you got, and he was a straight shooter. That was it.

NP: Many of the people we interviewed in Winnipeg were the head office people, spoke very highly of him.

RO: Yeah. He was just--.

NP: Doing his job.

RO: Yeah. He was doing his job. I think there's been a lot more labour peace the last few years. Well, obviously, it slowed down too. But hopefully it will--. There's still a number of people working across the waterfront, so. And if this Wheat Board thing is--. Talking to some people, it might help Thunder Bay. Even if it goes up ten percent, it will help Thunder Bay quite a bit. Let's hope for the future.

NP: Yes. I'm going to ask you a couple philosophical questions here, so. Before I do, have I hit on the changes and challenges that you felt were--?

RO: Well, the big ones were. I think one of the big ones was boxcars to hoppers, computerization. Communications have really improved over the years. Unfortunately, they're far more efficient with less people. That's automation. I think they've always been run efficiently for the times. Like people might say, "Well, years ago, they had so many people working for them," but times were different. But they were still efficient in those days, but it changes with the times. I think they've just kept up with it. I've been gone 14 years now, but I'm sure they're still very efficient. And there's probably been, since I've left, more and more improvements.

NP: Anything that sticks in your mind as being particularly challenging?

RO: Well, I think it was challenging for some of the workers when they kept downsizing and laying off people, and some never came back—lost a lot of elevators, a lot of workers. Some might have been lucky. I don't know. If they were trained as millwrights and electricians, they could get jobs elsewhere. It's like the paper mills, you know. But I think in retrospect, more of the elevators have survived than the paper mills. We've still got a fair presence, and I think the elevators that are left—not just talking about Sask Pool—are pretty well-run, I think, and they're pretty efficient. I think unless something drastic happens, which I can't think of because people will always want food--. And you listen to the demographics of the world, Africa is continuing to grow and so is the Middle East population wise, and they'll always need food, so.

NP: Just a question to ask there. What you say about the possibility of improving the situation out of Thunder Bay is fine. Is there a possibility of just bypassing Thunder Bay altogether and heading directly south?

RO: You mean to the States?

NP: Mmhmm.

RO: Well, the only thing that would be is--. I doubt it because the only place they could probably go to would be Duluth if you want to get it on a boat. It's far more efficient to ship stuff on a boat than it is by rail. And if you're one of these Greenpeace or ecology people, it's far more efficient and less pollution on a boat than it is going by rail. And also, you have to understand—and you can probably talk to more people—it's the quality you can control. It's hard to control it in individual hoppers. The country elevators are doing a better job, but I think it's just far more efficient to come here and go by boat. And especially if the ocean boats pick up, it just goes straight on and bypasses--. Just goes down the Seaway and out. That's it.

[1:30:21]

NP: You raise a point, which raises another question, and that is any changes in the shipping related to that product which went out on ships down east versus the rail shipping down east?

RO: We used to have a bunch of rail movement, and I'm not sure how much they do now, to elevators. I guess they went as far as Montreal, sometimes Three Rivers. What was the other one? Sept-Iles? But they didn't do that many of them. The reason sometimes they did them was sometimes when the crop wasn't available, and they had to get it out. When you have a contract, you've got to get it out, so they would get it down there.

NP: In smaller amounts, obviously.

RO: Yeah. Well, those hoppers can hold a lot on big trains. I think in the long run as the price of fuel and stuff keeps going up, it's going to be far more efficient to do it by boat. You can do a lot more, so.

NP: And talking about that, you mentioned that there's facilities for handling trucks. Where would they be coming from, and how would you justify the cost of trucking it?

RO: I think some of them were coming from Manitoba south. It would be southeast Manitoba from what I remember. And I'm not sure if they still are, but some farmer figured he could--. Some of the ones, they own farmer trucks. Farmers would come in themselves. "Figure I could make more money this way." They're entrepreneurs too, so. [Laughs]

NP: Okay. Here's a sort of philosophical question. Do you think that the work that you did contributed to Canada's success as an international grain trader?

RO: I don't know if what I did as an individual did it, but I think being part of the team, I helped Canada. I think all the people in Thunder Bay--. You know, we've gone through the Grain Commission, you name it, Lake Shippers, the railways, the whole kit and kaboodle. They all contributed, sure. No one person does it, let's face it. If somebody says they're the one person that did it, I think they're full of B.S. [Laughing] Really. You're all part of a team, and I think the team in Thunder Bay has always done a good job for quality and all that stuff, meeting deadlines. And I think they'll continue to do it from what I can see.

NP: So personally then, as you review your 37 years--.

RO: 36, 37. Whatever it was.

NP: 36, 37 years. What are you most proud of?

RO: Well. I'm not sure.

NP: Think about it for a little bit.

RO: I survived. Well, actually working for the same company, I guess. That's not going to happen too often anymore unless you're in the public sector, and even that might change too. But that's one of the few. In the private sector, it's not going to happen very often. Actually, it was sad in some ways, but enjoyable in other ways seeing the changes. Change is good. Made you adapt. [Laughs] You had to keep adapting. So it never hurts anybody. The only thing I hate to see was downsizing. You get to know people, and some lost their jobs, and that was never fun. But it was always--. It was a good place to work. Sask Pool was a good place to work. It was changing as I left because it was constant change. It always was, but I think it was starting to happen more and more quicker. I think most people in more places will say that change is coming. Maybe we take five, six years for something to really change. Now, God, it can change in a month, a week, a day. You just never know. [Laughs] Change is constant. But I enjoyed it. I worked with good people, company was good to me, so what else can you say? Although it's not Sask Pool anymore, Viterra, well, for Thunder Bay, I wish them luck for the city. You always think of your home city, too. And I think they seem to be on the right foot, so we'll see.

NP: When you were talking, it makes me think of the whole stress reaction and the fact that stress is a natural part of life, and your body just has to have time to recover from it. And so, if I'm interpreting what you're saying is that, initially or all the time there was change, it's just a question of the time that was allowed to recover. And then as--.

[1:35:16]

RO: That's true, yeah. I wouldn't say it was overly stressful, but it was a bit stressful at times. Like anything else, you still had deadlines to meet, and things kept changing, but I'm still alive. [Laughs] I didn't get it all--. So it was okay.

NP: And you kept things moving. Things were mostly done right, so you contributed to as little stress as possible.

RO: Well, Sask Pool survived, so it's--. They've been part of Thunder Bay for, oh, jeez, I don't know how long. Long before I started there. Long time. Because I think they were in the PUC Building from 19--. What did they tell me? How old is that building? It wasn't too long after the 1920s or something they were in there. They were in there a long, long time.

NP: You talked about everybody within the system contributed to Canada's success, and obviously the farmers are a critical piece. Any comments to add about the connections between your job here in Thunder Bay with the actual producers? Did you ever have any interaction with them?

RO: Oh, yeah. Sure. Actually, that's the other thing. They would come down. Surprisingly, a lot of farmers came through Thunder Bay on trips and that, and they always like to come down and see the elevator because it was their elevator. They owned it, you

know. They'd always accommodate them, make sure they could see the elevator, took them around, met people, which was nice. That happened, I know. You always heard about it. There were a bunch of farmers coming down, and even before I moved down to the elevators. So they'd always do that. Any farmers I met, they were straight up people. They were nice guys. Even we went out west and toured some of the farms. [Laughs] They were pretty sharp guys. They were hard workers, mind you, and it's--. Even a lot of that's been automated now too, and they're getting bigger, unfortunately. I don't know how many young people can get into it, but they're going to have to because they're aging as well. It's stressful. I would say they had more stress than I had because the weather and all that stuff, oh. [Laughs] I went out there for meetings, and God, you could see hail coming because they get some pretty wild weather out west. Now the Wheat Board, if it goes, which it probably is going to, they'll get more freedom, and that'll help a lot of maybe the younger ones, and maybe some of the older ones that feel a little more stressed because of it because now they have to make the choice.

NP: Remember you had talked about how being down at the elevator, even though it was just five minutes away, really made a difference because you were in constant communication and ease of communication. But the farmers were quite distant from Thunder Bay. Were there ever misconceptions on either side?

RO: Oh, I'm sure. [Laughs] Sure. When there were a couple of strikes, I don't think the farmers were too happy. I know they weren't. You could hear comments, or you heard about some comments. Probably some misconceptions that they all go south and all this kind of stuff. They're all pretty well to do. I think being a farmer is a tough job because they own it. That's their livelihood, and they don't really have any pension plans. Well, a lot of people aren't anymore now, the way things are going, so they have to make the money, you know. Probably their future retirement is tied up in the value of their land, so. But Sask Pool tried to have some interconnections, which was good. I hope they're still doing that.

NP: This is sort of a very general question, and I think maybe--. Well, it's actually specific. What are your most vivid memories about the elevators? So sights, smells, sounds.

RO: You're talking about the physical elevator?

NP: Mmhmm.

[1:40:02]

RO: Well, when you drive in the parking lot, and you go there, they're big. If you go up to the top and look out, oh, you're up pretty high. You see some of the dangers working there when you go there. You don't realize it until you're there. Cleaners are

banging away and belts are going all over the place, and there's always maintenance to do. It's a big operation. That's really one of the things that strikes you is the size of the place. If you just go into the office part and where the inspectors are and the Grain Commission, that's only a small part of it. You see where the rails come in, where the railcars come in, and the boats, the other side, the big slips. It's big. Yeah. It's huge. Actually, you can go there in the summer, it's still pretty cool because at that--. They get cold in the winter too. [Laughs] It takes a while. "We stay warm," that's what the guys were saying, and you could see it. It stays warm until later. [Telephone rings]

[Audio pauses]

NP: Want to ask you about some of those contact names, okay?

RO: Okay.

NP: As you know, we're still hoping through Friends of Grain Elevators to establish a National Historic Site on the Thunder Bay waterfront to actually recognize what we've been talking about, that massive effort that's made Canada a really successful grain trader. So if that comes about, what do you think from your perspective would be critical to feature in such a centre?

RO: Well, it would be good if you could have some cleaners in there and some belts running and show them--. Probably some of it you'd have to do on a screen. It might be very expensive to have a still working elevator, but have the parts there and a big video screen showing what would happen when a car comes in, where it goes in. Then have a tour of the actual machines so they could see what a cleaner looked like, what a belt looked like, what a bin is. All that kind of stuff. You could have a--. Where the inspection office is, you could explain that, where, like I said earlier, you can confirm it with an inspector that it should be in the northern side for the light, and what they would do. You could have samples of grain, and the inspector could show them what they did, and what qualified as certain grades. Stuff like that. Where it went, and where the boats come. It would be great if you could ever get an old freighter tied up there as well. [Laughs]

But anyways, I think you'd have to do some of it visually and just make sure that you can have an elevator operating inside of the elevator that they could go up. You'd probably have to be careful for safety reason, but they could see how high it is and all that kind of stuff, and the views you get and where the offices would be. Where the people had to work. I think people would find it quite interesting to tell you the truth. But you'd have to--. I'm sure there's old cleaners around and all that kind of stuff and belts you could show them. You could either do it as an older elevator--. Actually, what you could do is you could have it--. You could have screens. "This is how the elevators used to operate." You might have to go into a modern elevator now and do some videotaping of, "These are the stuff they got now and how they got there." How they automated and how it's changed over the

years. Stuff like that. We used to have, I don't know, 100 guys operating this place, now we're down to 20 to do the same. The same amount of grain or more is what they're doing. So something like that, I would think.

NP: The little, tiny ships that used to come in versus these--.

RO: Yeah. They were still a fair size, but they were tiny. You're right. And I guess you'd need to make sure you had some parking, but Pool 2 would actually be probably ideal. It's not too big, not too small. It's near the Marina area there. Obviously, it's still in good shape because it's still standing. Well, they'll all _-. They'll stand forever. I mean, just they're so well made. That would be the other thing to show them. Part of it, I don't know if you could have a cut out, but you could explain how thick the walls are and all that and how they're built, because I think Pool 2 is poured concrete from what I can see, and that's what they've been doing.

NP: Supposedly the first successful continuous pour concrete project in Canada.

RO: Yeah. Whereas Pool 6, I think, some of them had tiles bins. They weren't as good.

NP: Ah. Good of you to mention Pool 6 because I said earlier on that I was going to check with you and say do you remember where you were when Pool 6 was blown up and your thoughts around--?

[1:45:13]

RO: Actually, I was here looking at it. [Laughs] Hopefully in the long run--. It was never going to be used as an elevator, and so I think I may be dead before it all happens, but they'll reclaim the land. I mean, it's a beautiful site for the waterfront. If you're not going to use it--. Well, it felt sad. A lot of guys that worked there had a lot of memories of the place. It was a good elevator. They were all good elevators. And the office building is still there, I think. I'm not sure who's using it now.

NP: The city.

RO: It was well made. That was a--.

NP: It's not that old, is it?

RO: No. [Laughs] It's only, what, ten years old? No, a little more.

NP: Well, a little more than that.

RO: 20.

NP: Time flies!

RO: It was just finished not long after they closed the elevator. They used it for seminars and stuff for a while. And there's all new sheet piling, you know, where the dock is all down there as well. That dock will be there for quite a while too. They may have to dredge it at one time. Who knows. I don't know. But what can you do? That's the way it goes.

NP: So how did you feel? Like was there any emotion at all when you saw it go up?

RO: Well, not really. I knew working in there, it was never going to open up again.

NP: And why was that?

RO: Well, they just--. The amount of grain going through Thunder Bay had decreased, so they just didn't need it. They could do it all at 7A and 7B.

NP: And those were far more efficient plants?

RO: Yeah. And 7A and 7B are beside each other. They have a belt that goes back and forth between the elevators. They can transfer grain back and forth. Far more efficient operation. So it's--.

NP: Are there any questions I should have asked you that you were dying to answer that I didn't ask?

RO: Not really. It's hard to remember back that many years, you know. It's--. Actually, if I think of any, if you give me your email address, I can email you. No, I think it's pretty thorough. The only thing, well, you'll hopefully get different perspectives from actual operations guys who were right in there. Actually, it wouldn't even hurt to get a millwright explaining how much work it is to keep an elevator going, and an electrician. The constant wiring. Guys that ran cleaners and changing screens. A whole bunch. All that kind of stuff. Because cleaners, you know, different grades, you need to change screens and do things, and different cleaners do different things. So hopefully you get some operations guys.

NP: Do you have any memorabilia other than your machine or pictures that you could share with us? Either just loan us and we can make copies or whatever to add to our collection?

RO: I'll have to look and get back to you. [Laughs] Like I said, I've been gone a long time. I'm sure I have something somewhere. I'll see what I can dig up and get back to you for sure.

NP: Great. Great. Well, I'd like to thank you very much. You've added a perspective. I've done a lot of these interviews now, so you've added new information, which I really appreciate. So thank you so much for taking the time.

RO: Well, thank you. And I hope your project goes well.

End of interview.