

Narrator: Stan Polowski (SP)

Company Affiliations: United Grain Growers (UGG)

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Summary: Grain handler Stan Polowski remembers his six years of employment at United Grain Growers A house during his young adulthood. Polowski describes the operations of each floor in the grain elevator—the basement, the car shed, the scale floor, the inspection office, the cleaner deck, the distributing floor, the annex floor, and the bins—and some of the major equipment used for each task. He details some changes to the local industry, his fond memories of his colleagues and social life in the elevators, and he recites a self-written poem about the city’s grain port. Other topics discussed include work alongside the Canadian Grain Commission staff, work conditions in the elevators, UGG A’s sister elevator UGG M in the Intercity area, his brief activity in the local union, and the computerization of UGG M.

Keywords: United Grain Growers (UGG); UGG Elevator A; Current River; Port Arthur; Thunder Bay terminal grain elevators; Grain elevator equipment; Car shed operations; Grain car unloading; Boxcar dumpers; Boxcars; Hopper cars; Cleaner deck; Grain cleaning; Grain cleaning machines; Distributing floor; Annex floor; Grain weighing; Electric grain scales; Grain inspection; Grain sampling; Grain varieties; Grain grades; Grain transportation—rail; Grain transportation—ship; Grain trimmers; Bin diving; Canadian Grain Commission; UGG Elevator M (McCabe’s); Health and safety; Dust control; Labour unions; Labour organization; Industry downturn; Computerization; Churchill, Manitoba

Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, it’s a pleasure to be here this afternoon with you, Stan, to do an interview about your experience in the grain trade. Maybe we can start by your giving your name for the record, as they say, on the tape.
SP: Sure.
EE: Then describing how you came to work in the grain industry.

SP: Well, basically--.

EE: Your name?

SP: My name is Stan Polowski. I'm a resident of Thunder Bay. How I came to work in the grain trade? As I'm working my way through school, I used to work at a garage in Current River—back, this was in the '70s—and Bill Tarnowski was the superintendent at the time, the late Bill Tarnowski.

EE: At--?

SP: At United Grain Growers [UGG] in Thunder Bay, in the Current River part. And lo and behold, he recognized, I guess, myself as a decent worker, so I got hired on as a student. And I liked the job very much. I worked my way through university for three seasons. I would work from basically April until September and, you know, put money away for my tuition. And then when I graduated from university in '78 in my chosen field of education, there was very few jobs that worked full time. So basically, I worked six years at the elevators. Probably three years full time.

EE: So this would be about 1975 or so?

SP: Yeah, '75 probably until '81.

EE: Until '81. '75 to '78 part time, summertime.

SP: Summertime.

EE: And then--.

SP: Yeah, four or five months, and then full time from '78 onwards. Yeah.

EE: Yes. And what kind of work did you end up doing then during--? Well, maybe just stage by stage in this then. So as a student during the summertime?

SP: Well, basically, to be quite honest, I had a taste of most of the—at the time, of course we're talking 30 years or 30 plus years ago—I had a flavour for most of the jobs at the time at the elevator. I used to work in the carshed, basically unloading and loading cars. There was part of kind of a clean-up crew that we used to clean up various things. I worked on all floors. I worked on the scale floor working with the computerized equipment of loading and unloading. I worked on the distributing floor, which is basically moving the spouts to the various grains that are being distributed to the various bins in the elevator. I worked in the annex, which is moving the large equipment with the belts to put in the bins. I worked in the cleaner deck, which is-- You know, most of the grain is cleaned, and all the impurities in the grain and chaff and so removed. So I pretty well, in my time there, I had a flavour for pretty well all the jobs outside of the specialized things like millwrights or things you would need, you know, tickets for. So, yeah. So I had a good taste of all the major jobs in the elevator, I guess, you could say.

EE: How large was the workforce at this elevator would you say?

SP: At the time, the workforce-- Well, it would depend on the season. In the summer, of course, when it's busy time and the shipping is open, I would say we had a workforce of probably 150 to 175 men. At the busy time, they were pretty well working around the clock in terms of cleaning and maintenance. So that was quite the size. It depends on the season. There were layoffs in the winter, of course, with the shipping season not being available, then they would downsize and that sort of thing. But I think at the pinnacle in the summer, probably between 150 and 175 at United Grain, based on around-the-clock work.

EE: Yes. And during the three years of full time work, were you employed through the whole winter or were you actually laid off?

SP: Actually, I was very, very fortunate because in my time at the elevator, I was laid off once, and that was for about three months because of the winter and so on and various conditions. But other than that, I worked pretty well year-round, so I was quite fortunate in that respect. And as I mentioned, the type of work you would do in the summer when it was busy and they had ships and that sort of thing was quite different from winter work in which you would do most of your loading with boxcars and tanker cars and that sort of thing. But during my time there, my full-time work, I was only laid off for about three months, and this was in winter. Of course, it would go by seniority in terms of the layoffs. So depending on the number of people they would need. Yeah.

EE: Sure. And when you concluded your work there, you went to a teaching position?

SP: Right, yeah. I had gone to school as an educator. I was quite happy at the elevators to be quite honest. I mean, it was good work. I enjoyed the lifestyle, but you know, when the opportunity came up for me to get in my chosen profession, then I bid adieu to the elevators in, I guess, it was the latter part of July 1981. And I went to Churchill, Manitoba, which related has grain elevators there as well. I met a few of the government employees that I worked with that actually were stationed up there for periods of time. So

although I left the grain elevator and the grain business, I still had some dealings with some of the government employees that I worked with, so.

EE: The social life.

SP: Yeah.

EE: [Laughs] Yeah, that would be very interesting to run into them. Your working in the various parts of the elevator could enable us this afternoon to walk around the elevator figuratively speaking, and you can describe what happened in each point. What was distinctive about the--.

[0:05:13]

SP: I guess in a nutshell I can kind of give you a little summation. As I mentioned, I haven't worked there for a long time, so in terms of the automation and the equipment, there probably is massive changes. But basically, at the elevator, you have the cars come in, and they're unloaded in what's called the car shed. And basically, what happens is there's a conveyor system that puts them up into a large, huge bin that stores them. All the grain has to be weighed and graded, of course, because they have to know if it's a certain type of barley or wheat. That's government inspection. Then from there--.

EE: Well, let's--.

SP: Go ahead, sorry.

EE: Spend some more time in that car shed. By this time, the grain was coming in in hopper cars, mostly tanker cars?

SP: They were mostly boxcars, but there were some hopper cars.

EE: Oh, so it was mostly still boxcars?

SP: It was mostly boxcars. I would say about two-third, one-third, were mostly the old boxcars and then the hopper cars were popular. And now, I don't think they have very many, so.

EE: We'll just worry about that time because that's your experience.

SP: Sure. For sure.

EE: Those are your observations. How physical was the work of unloading that had to be done at that elevator?

SP: Well, it wasn't really that physical. Most of it--. Like everybody had a position to do. They had long cables, and what they would do is they would hook up the cars, and then the person would operate the cables that they would actually pull them forward. Probably the most physical work was the person that actually had a large bar that actually opened the door. Sometimes they were very stiff, the boxcars. But the actual work was done by what are called loaders. They would secure the boxcar into place, and they would have these huge bars that would come up and open the grain, and then they would kind of rock it back and forth with what were called lodge baffles.

EE: So you had mechanical assistance for unloading, if you will.

SP: Yeah, yeah.

EE: It was machinery that did that?

SP: Oh, yeah, it was. I didn't operate that part, but there was different factors that you would do. And every--.

EE: Were there specialists in the workforce that ran the unloading equipment?

SP: Not really specialists, but there was like equipment that you would actually operate in securing the boxcar, and kind of lifting it up and down and putting baffles in so that it would be unloaded and so on. Basically, that was the car shed.

EE: But there were some people who did that more than others?

SP: Oh, yeah. For sure. Oh yeah. And usually, I believe at the time it was a higher paying job, and it was more of a specialized job because to be able to run the equipment and to manipulate a thousand-thousand tonne boxcar up and down and back and forth in a safe environment, of course--.

EE: Right. Hydraulic equipment, I suppose, was it?

SP: Right. For sure. Yeah, yeah.

EE: Yeah. So each car was unloaded--.

SP: Yeah.

EE: By this equipment. Just one car at a time?

SP: One car at a time, yeah. And like I say, there was I would say maybe a quarter, at the time, a quarter of the cars were the large hopper cars that were unloaded by opening the bottom. There was a bottom sheet that would come out. That would be a lot quicker and less physical as opposed to securing it and rocking it back and forth.

EE: Were there two different arrangements on the floor of the car shed?

SP: Yeah. Basically, they had what they called dumpers because they would dump the cars. They had three. Two were pretty well restricted to the old-style car, the boxcar, and one was more for the new hopper cars in which you had like a large gear and an opening underneath that you would open up.

EE: Yeah. It was just poured out by gravity, eh?

SP: Yeah. Exactly. Yeah.

EE: So the grain pours into the bins, which you were beginning to describe underneath. And what happens then?

SP: Well basically what happens then is every boxcar that comes in has to be graded by the government staff because the grading goes, of course, according to the different qualities of wheat and barley and so on. They have to be graded depending on the impurities and the product of it. Once they designate it as whatever the grain may be, then it goes up to the scale floor in which it's noted that it's, you know. [No.] 2 Red 13.5 or tough [No.] 3 utility, whatever the case may be. And then from there, they would weigh it and ensure that there's so much of the grain. Then from there, they would dictate to what's called the distributing floor. These gentlemen would move spouts that would put them in bins, and they would put them in various bins. And then it would be either loaded and cleaned right away or put into the annex to store to be cleaned for another time.

EE: Sure. The grain in each boxcar would be homogeneous. Each boxcar would have its own grade?

SP: Oh, yes. Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

EE: And when you had the grade established and grain was being dumped in bins, mixing could take place in bins—grain from different cars—but it would always be the same grade that went into a bin?

SP: Right, right. Yeah, it would.

EE: How many bins did this necessitate in an elevator?

SP: Well, in the elevator I worked at, there was two annexes—the inshore and the outshore—and I'm not sure the capacity. But you had some bins that were, actually, the grain was cleaned right away and went to the cleaner deck in which the grain was cleaned and then it was sorted and then stored. If it couldn't be cleaned right away, it would have to be sent to the annex in larger bins that would store up to 16 boxcars of the same quality grain, and they would store it there. And then--.

[0:10:18]

EE: In one bin?

SP: In one huge bin. A lot of times too—and related to that is that—some of the bins had to be cleaned, and that was a physical job because you would actually have this equipment that people would be lowered down, you know, 96 feet down. [Laughs]

EE: Well, let's clean out bins. You've done that, I suppose?

SP: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've done that.

EE: So let's clean a bin.

SP: Yeah.

EE: It's empty of grain?

SP: It's empty of grain, but what happens sometimes depending on the quality of grain—like if it was something like screenings or something that--. Like you never—I shouldn't say never, it did happen by human error—you wouldn't want to mix different grains.

EE: Of course not.

SP: Because it's like--. But anyway. What would happen is sometimes they would have to clean the bins if it was like a screening or something that you would actually have to physically go down and clean the bin out in order to put another quality grade in it.

EE: So you were lowered down 96 feet?

SP: You were lowered down 96 feet, and there was a crank system. And I wasn't down there a lot because I was a bigger person. Usually, the lighter people would go down because it was less physical.

EE: The little guys got the chance, eh?

SP: Yeah. You would go down and clean the bin, and then they would--.

EE: And this was, what, primarily sweeping it up?

SP: Sweeping it up, yeah. Sweeping it up or actually shooting it down a chute onto a belt so that the bin would be clean. Sometimes--.

EE: It's just a matter of getting it all out to the bottom--.

SP: Yeah, getting it all out, yeah.

EE: To be sure that it's emptied to the bottom.

SP: Yeah, yeah. Just like if you were--. Exactly. Just like if you were cleaning, you wanted to make sure that it was clean, and you would get either rakes or hoes and push it down a chute. And sometimes, like I say, depending on the quality of grain and that, you'd have to clean them because you couldn't put a good quality grain onto that. You know, it could cause havoc when you're shipping the grain and you have impurities that are more than the acceptable standards.

EE: Because each of these bins would also be emptied later on, or the grain removed from it, through the bottom?

SP: For sure, yeah. Oh, yeah.

EE: Onto the belts down there.

SP: And that's how it would be loaded to the boats because basically if you had--. And what would happen is that, you know, a ship would be coming in and they'd say, "Well, I need 20,000 tonnes of [No.] 1 Red 12.5." And they would have a big accounting system with all the elevators and send them to the various ones that had that grain. And then from there--. And again, these would have to be sampled as well, and then it would be brought up, and then it would be loaded onto the ships. And of course, the grain trimmers—who aren't really elevator employees—but they were the ones responsible for the large telescopic, circular items that would load the bins up and load the ships up.

EE: Yeah, the chutes.

SP: Yeah.

EE: So we've been in the car shed, we've moved the grain up to the weighing and the cleaning.

SP: Yeah, yeah.

EE: What happens in the cleaning process?

SP: Well, basically, in the cleaning process is that they have different machines, and there's different adjustments on the machine, and depending on the grain—be it wheat or durum or oats—would be more conducive to clean from various machines. And basically, what would happen is that it would have to be cleaned, the impurities removed—the chaff and the dust and more of the not-so-good qualities of the grain. And then what they would do is they actually would have to have samplers and people who were actually going to inspect it to make sure that it met the certain standards. Then it was stored, and it would sit there until either a boxcar or ideally a boat--. Because you can load a boat a lot quicker than you can boxcars because it's continuous. And then they would sell it to either salties—which we call, this is overseas or ocean-going vessels—or lakers that would go to various places in the country.

EE: Right. And you as an employee, again, of Grain Growers in this elevator, would get how close to the loading of the ships? You'd be involved under the direction of the grain trimmers, I guess, in deciding while you would shoot it--.

SP: Well, the grain trimmers were actually responsible for the loading, but it was a team effort. The people that would, say, work in the tunnels would be the lower part. They would open up the grain. You'd have the government staff that would grade it. You'd have the spout people that would put it on a certain bin. You'd have a gentleman that would move this machine that would--. So there was a lot of people involved in various aspects of it depending on the various job that you had at the time. Probably one of the most important jobs was the inspector because he would have to okay the grain and make sure it was of good quality. Because the prices of grain, you know, at that time, if there was various impurities in and that, the quality of the grain it wouldn't be very good.

EE: Right. And these inspectors are Canadian Grain Commission [CGC] employees?

SP: Right. The Canadian Grain--. But we also had the elevator inspectors. While the Grain Commission they authorized as the government, and they kind of sign their seal of approval shall we say, but there's also inspectors within the elevator that would designate the grain as a various quality and that sort of thing. There was that as well.

EE: So it was UGG employees that were involved in the primary designation of the--?

SP: Well, UGG employees, but the ultimate authority was the Canadian Grain Commission.

EE: Right.

SP: For in house things, like if we were just storing it in-house, then yes. But ultimately, when it was shipped, it was the Canadian Grain Commission that had the authority to say, "This is good wheat, or this is the quality that we're looking for." They had the ultimate authority, as it should be.

[0:15:10]

EE: Do you remember how many company inspectors there would have been working at any one time?

SP: Well, it's hard to say, but usually they had about a couple inspectors depending. If they were loading a boat, they would have two pretty well, and of course the Grain Commission would take their samples, and they would work in concert and that sort of

thing. And of course, you have various--. Like one job was a sampler. He actually had to go and take samples of the grain going to the boat, bring it, and they would look at it and ensure it was of the required quality.

EE: I don't suppose UGG kept samples, stored samples in the elevator?

SP: We had some samples that we would keep, and mostly they were for—my understanding—was mostly for testing. Like people would get, “Ok, what kind of grain is this?” And looking at it. So it would be used more as a refresher or as a tool to help people to know about the various grains and the qualities and the amount of seeds that should be in it and so on because it was--.

EE: But if there's a stock of samples anywhere, it would be the Grain Commission that would keep those, I guess.

SP: Right. Yeah. They would have that. In fact, I'm pretty sure that they have to keep a sample for—and I don't know, they would know better—but they would have to keep samples on hand of this grain and that sort of thing.

EE: Yes. It is part of the ultimate verification. Although, I suppose the reality of the Canadian grain trade was that with the Grain Commission supervising, the Wheat Board had established standards long ago, which people expect to always be met when they--.

SP: Oh, yeah. For sure, yeah. And I mean, if you're buying a good quality durum to make a high quality of semolina spaghetti, you wouldn't want a substandard product or that sort of thing and that. Hence the Grain Commission would be involved and that sort of thing.

EE: Yes. We've talked about the activities sort of generically, if you will. How many different kinds of grains did you work with?

SP: Oh, there's lots of kinds. Like I mean, for every type of wheat, there was at least--. Like it would go by protein content. Like [No.] 1 Red 14.5 would be 14.5 protein content, [No.] 2 Red would be a lower quality grain. Utility would be a wet grain that would have to be dried. There was different kinds of barley. Barley that was more for feed, barley that's more for bread. Some barley used for-- , klages barley used more for hops of alcohol. I mean, there was durum that was used for various types of spaghetti. There was rapeseed that was used for making of canola oil. So there was many, many different kinds, and within each of these grains, there was different grading of the grains within the grains. So it was almost like a flowchart. You have the top and then you would have subdivisions.

EE: Right. Well, I was thinking of the species, if you will, first of all. The various kinds of grains and then their grades.

SP: Yeah, there's many. And in fact, with research over time—and they were always doing research—and making it a better, more of a hybrid, more of a better quality. So it was always kind of an ongoing sort of a process.

EE: Right.

SP: But kind of an aside—not really a joke, but an aside—but most of the inspectors I knew had to wear glasses because after so much time of looking, you know, [laughs] it's very, I don't want to say tedious, but you're looking for various things in the grain and it's-- [Laughing] So.

EE: The old magnifying glass.

SP: Well. [Laughs]

EE: That kids like to pick up and run around with to investigate.

SP: Yeah. For sure, yeah.

EE: What were the conditions in the elevators like by this time in terms of air quality and--.

SP: Well, when I was there in the late '70s, they did have air filter systems. But depending on where you worked, some of them were good and some weren't as good. And I remember the one summer, I remember it well—I can't remember which summer it was, but it was late '70s—they were actually doing a revamping of it, and they had very little. You know, in terms of putting up these filters and so on, they had very little and a lot of times it was very poor. The grain dust and that would be very-- You'd have to wear a mask a lot of times, and your mask would be quite dirty and that.

EE: And you were encouraged to wear masks?

SP: Well, sure, yeah.

EE: Was there anything else you were encouraged to wear?

SP: Well, I mean work safely. I mean, a lot of times we would get heck if we didn't have our hardhat on, and rightly so, safety boots. You know, common sense. Like I could be working in an unsafe area and not paying attention when grain cars are going by, or heavy equipment's being operated and that sort of thing. You know, a lot of safety is common sense.

EE: It was a relatively safe workplace?

SP: I would say yes. I mean, accidents happen. People get hurt. When you're working with industry and equipment when I was there, most of the people here most of the time, you know, people worked in a safe environment and helped each other and that sort of thing. But I mean, human error when you're not thinking sometime or you're not paying attention and you walk into a big pillar or something--. [Laughs] You know, that's more inattentive, so.

EE: Are there any accidents that happened while you were there that stand out?

SP: I'm just trying to think. That was a while ago, but I can't remember any serious--. There may be some people that hurt their back or something overexerting themselves, but I can't think of any life-threatening or people getting killed on the job because of unsafe practices. That's not saying it didn't happen, but in my time, I can't recall that.

EE: Did you get any kind of sense you were flanked by, what, Richardson's on one side was it?

[0:20:00]

SP: Well, we had--. There was UGG. We had UGG, and there was Sask Pool 4, and then there was Manitoba Pool 1, I believe, that has been demolished, and I think Richardson's was the big orange one. That's how we knew that because it kind of stuck out, Like it was the orange one that was painted, so. [Laughs]

EE: Right. Did you have any kind of sense of what the other elevators their workforces were like?

SP: Not really. I mean, the thing is, I think a lot of the commonalities in terms of the equipment and what they did, were pretty similar. As far as the technology for various elevators, I would assume at the time it would be similar. But I would imagine—and this is kind of just an educated guess—that the workday and the day if you worked at UGG or Sask Pool 4, Richardson's, was pretty similar in terms to what you would do. But--.

EE: There was another UGG elevator.

SP: Yeah. It was called McCabe's, Elevator M. We used to kid around and say, "You're going bowling," because of the big M, McCabe's. [Laughing] Big M Bowl.

EE: Oh, yes. Mario's and McCabe's.

SP: Yeah. But they had that. That was--. I didn't have the fortune or misfortune of working there. Some people when they, depending on their seniority, they might have to go there and work for a short period of time in order to be able to work because of seniority and the number of employees needed for the various elevators.

EE: Are you able to specify a bit more precisely here fortune or misfortune?

SP: Well, I mean, it just depends. Like some people I know, McCabe's they didn't like working there and some people did. So I guess it's a personal choice. It's like if you work at Place A or Place B.

EE: Any sense of what the difference was?

SP: I don't know. I never worked there. But just in terms of the cleanliness and just by going by what I heard that UGG A house was a bigger house, it was a cleaner house.

EE: The one you were in?

SP: Yeah, yeah. The one I was, yeah.

EE: And the other one hadn't been fully cleaned out? [Laughs]

SP: You know, I mean, but these are all perceptions.

EE: Sure.

SP: You know, you look here, and two and two is four. I mean, you can't argue with that.

EE: No. No, indeed. What about such other things as vermin around the place, did you--?

SP: Well, I mean, they had some pretty big rats there to be quite honest. I mean, especially if they get wet, it was a natural feed for them, and a lot of times you'd see mice and larger rats in the evening and that. I mean, I think it would be a common thing because you're having so much grain, it gets wet, and it's a nice food for them. It's nice and easy, so. But I don't think it was rampant in any way, not that I can recall anyway. But, I mean, it's a common thing, you know?

EE: You didn't set out to kill them or anything like that?

SP: No, no, no. No, but from what I've been told is that if you were working in a dark area in the tunnels or something, don't corner a rat because they will show no mercy in order to escape. That's what I've heard, so.

EE: Yeah.

SP: So, if you're cornered, get out of the way and let them escape.

EE: Survivalists.

SP: Yeah, survival because they--. But yeah.

EE: The workers of all the elevators belonged to, what, Lodge 650 of the grain handlers?

SP: I believe, yeah. It's been a while. Yeah, the grain handler's union.

EE: Were you at all active in the union?

SP: Not really. I was there for a short time. I actually went to a few meetings, and they would have meeting in terms of information sharing and so on. But in my short time there, actually signed up to be involved with negotiations, but I never made it. They would usually go by seniority. But like I say, I was there for--. But I enjoyed my time there. I really did. I enjoyed the work, enjoyed the camaraderie of various people, and yeah. So I did enjoy my time there, actually. That's sincerely, so.

EE: Have we walked through every part of the elevator in which you worked?

SP: Well, I think the thing is I mentioned the scale floor. Basically on the scale floor it's the electrical weighing. The distributing floor is where I worked. That was a good job because it was physical. You were moving and that, and basically you move these large spouts onto the hole. Like they would say, "3 Receiver 27," so you'd move this big thing. And you'd have a walkie talkie, and when you secured it, you would say, "3 Receiver 27 okay." They would okay it and put the grain down the chute. The annex, if the grain had to be--. You couldn't clean it right away. It had to be stored in the large bins, and the annex would be moving of these large conveyors over the bins, and you would store it there. The tunnels, I worked there a few times in terms of when boats are being loaded or boxcars. You go down and you would open up the various bins, and they would go up and be weighed and so on.

The elevator's big. You could see the size of the bins, but most of it's storage, because there are floors that are working. But not everybody's working at every floor because--. You have your basement. You have your tunnels. You have your cleaner deck—which is cleaning of the grain. You had your annex. You had your scale floor. You had your distributing floor. So basically, you had six working areas per se. And of course, you had millwrights looking after maintaining of equipment and replacing buckets that would transport the grain up and so on. So you had that sort of thing. You had your electricians if there was any power problems there. I remember one time—I remember it well—that somebody said, "You know, the best thing the electricians could be doing is sitting down doing nothing, because once you don't have any power, then you're in trouble." But yeah, it was--. Everybody had jobs to do and that.

[0:25:06]

EE: Was there such a thing as a typical day in the elevators or--?

SP: Well, a typical day? Yes. I mean, depending on where you worked it was typical.

EE: Yeah.

SP: I mean if you worked in the car--.

EE: Different kinds of typical days.

SP: Yeah, different kinds. I mean, if you worked in the car shed and you were entrusted with certain things, you would unload the cars. I mean, if you worked the distributing floor, you would wait for the signal to put the spouts on the various bins. If you worked on the scale floor, you would, you know, man the receivers or the shippers and weigh the grain. So, you know. But when I say typical, it depends. If you were loading a boat or if you were loading boxcars--. Sometimes, unfortunately, you'd have problems and

foul-ups, and that wouldn't be so typical. [Laughs] That wouldn't be good because through human error--. But I think routine would be a better way as opposed to typical because if you worked a certain floor, it was pretty routine because you did basically the same job. It may change somewhat, but you know, that sort of thing.

EE: What size was the management force in the elevators?

SP: Well, you had--. Well, I'm thinking back at UGG, there was a superintendent. There was, I think, a couple of superintendents. There was usually a management of three or four, basically, shift bosses, but you also had like foremans on the floor.

EE: Yeah. A foreman in each area, I suppose.

SP: Pretty well. Mostly on the cleaner deck because they worked in concert with the person. You had a foreman there, and he was a non-union person. No, a union person, I should say. Then you had mostly non-unions, that would be supervisors of various things, doing the scheduling and filling out reports or whatever else they did and sort of thing.

EE: What kind of an employer was UGG?

SP: You know, I've got no complaints to be quite honest. I liked it. I think at the time we had a decent wage. I got along well with people. I mean, it's like anything. I think the thing is if you put into something what you want to get out, or if you're fair and decent with people, you know. I had very few problems employee-wise in terms of that. I mean, I did my job and respected people that did theirs and vice-versa. It was, I guess, I don't want to say a testament. That's not the right word. But for my three summers that I worked there, they called me back all the time, and I was one of the first to come back, and it was a choice. I mean, you know, the thing is I'm a student and they know that I had a start and end date when I went back to school. But I mean I got along well with people like Ray Cousineau, who's a fine man. He's aged. Bob Antoniak, I see Bob. I kid with hi all the time. I say, "Bob, you're a fountain of youth! You're getting younger!" You know, Bill Belanger, I mentioned was the young superintendent. Robby Hollingsworth. So I know a lot of these gentlemen personally. You're fair with them and--. I know some people, so-and-so is this or that or whatever, but--.

EE: Was there anything distinctive about the workforce as a whole in ethnic or other terms? Or were they just kind of--.

SP: Well, yeah. I think the thing is as far as ethnicity goes, there was a lot of European, a lot of Ukrainian people. We had in that respect a lot of people from the old country, but good workers and that.

EE: Which old country? [Laughs]

SP: Well, I mean, there was Italians, there was Slovaks, there was Ukrainians, you know. East Europeans, I guess, you could say.

EE: So continental Europeans. Central Europeans a lot of them, eh?

SP: Continental Europe, yeah. Yeah. So there was kind of a mixture, and some of the fellows were funny because they knew their job. And if I can be humorous, they would say, "No good to know too much!" Because if you did, they'd ask you to do more different jobs. But that was more of a joke than anything. [Laughing] But each of them, you know, you got along well, and everybody had a job to do. You knew your responsibilities, and it was well laid out. There was training involved, so it wasn't as if they said, "Do this," and you didn't have kind of a clue. But no, they're fond memories, and I still remember a lot of the employees I used to work with and shared a few laughs with and a few jokes, pure or otherwise, with I guess you could say.

EE: Any particular beer parlour that was the place?

SP: Well, Bunny's was close by. It used to be called Bunny's. I don't know what it's called now. But it was close to the elevator.

EE: The strip joint?

SP: Yeah. Well, and then the Park. We'd go up there and have a couple of beer, but--.

EE: Which is also a--.

SP: But there was a lot of things too with UGG when I was there. They had social activities. Like they had a curling bonspiel, and they had a golf tournament, and this sort of thing that they would try to--.

EE: Company organized or--?

SP: Oh, yeah. No, well, company organized? They were organized by the workers, but the company would pony-up the ante in terms of renting the curling ice or whatever the case may be and try to get people involved in the camaraderie and that sort of thing.

EE: So there was a social life for the employees?

SP: Yeah. Well, yeah. Not everyday.

EE: No, of course not, no.

SP: I mean, it wouldn't have--. But there would be events and fish derbies and things like this that would try to promote the camaraderie within the employees and that sort of thing.

EE: Because there was a time when companies might have had hockey teams.

SP: Yeah.

EE: But I guess that was long gone by the late '70s.

[0:30:03]

SP: Yeah. I can't recall hockey teams at that time, but--.

EE: But a golf tournament amongst you?

SP: Yeah, golf tournament. I remember curling, good curling bonspiels and that. And sometimes I think we even got scrub baseball games on a Sunday or something like that.

EE: Sure. Yeah.

SP: So just the social aspect.

EE: None of this involved, let's say, the workers from Richardson or Sask Pool?

SP: Not too often, but I mean, people would socialize with other people. It's like anything. You can socialize with the people you work with or other people so to speak. But yeah.

EE: Well, we've moved to the, "What you might like people to know about the work that you did during these years?" If you were--. You have the opportunity here to convey a sense of things or a memory of things to people who will listen to your words in future years.

SP: Well, I mean, the thing is, is I've been blessed with a good memory and also with a good work ethic, I believe.

EE: And good health.

SP: In fact, I can remember my first day working at the elevators. It was in April, and we were shovelling off the big dock area because there was a boat coming in the next day. It seems like yesterday. I remember a lot of the people that I worked with and some of the activities that we did in terms of the work. And I remember the jobs that I preferred, and I usually was able to do that. But any job was fine.

EE: What did you prefer?

SP: Well, I liked the distributing floor. It was good. But I also--.

EE: As you were saying, physical work, rerouting the grain.

SP: Yeah. Rerouting, and you're moving. The cleaner deck was okay, but it was kind of loud. But I was working the scale--. I had many jobs. And I don't want to sound curt, but I believe—and this is water under the bridge—but I believe that they might have had designs on me to be on management in some way, shape, or form. I'm not sure of that. I enjoyed it. I knew most of the jobs, and the jobs I did, I believe I did well and had a sound understanding and strong work ethic. So I've got nothing but good memories about the elevators and my coworkers. Sometimes I fouled up in terms of making mixes or--. Not purposely or whatever. [Laughing] We're all human, but that's that.

EE: What did happen if a mix occurred?

SP: Well, human error. I remember one time I can tell you specifically. If you're busy and you put the spout in the wrong hole, you'll have a mixture of oats and wheat or something. Well, they'd have to clean it and sort it out and that.

EE: And that could be done? It was putting it through the cleaning equipment?

SP: Oh, yeah. But there would be a process. It would be a delayed process. But nobody fouls up on purpose.

EE: Well, no.

SP: And nobody would say, “Oh, you did this. You’re going to get three days off,” or something like that. I mean, it wasn’t like that. You would know. And if you did foul up--. At least I did, I felt badly. But I mean, it’s human error. It happens. Life goes on so to speak.

EE: Yeah. What might surprise people most about the work that you did?

SP: I’m really not sure. I mean this was a long time ago. But I think a lot of the--. In fact, to be quite honest, about 12 years ago, in my career as an educator I think it was in Beardmore and the time, and I actually made arrangements to get a tour of the elevator. They were busy—the bosses were—and I had permission, so I gave them a tour. Things have changed a little bit, but in terms of the premise of the various floors--. And I gave the kids a tour, and they asked me questions, and I was able to answer them and that sort of thing.

EE: This is almost about 20 years from the time you started full time.

SP: Oh, yeah.

EE: ’78 to ’98.

SP: Yeah.

EE: And it hadn’t changed that much?

SP: No, no. And then as far as the standards—and I couldn’t speak to that—or the equipment and that sort of thing, but the basic premise in terms of, “This is the scale floor. This is the distributing floor. This is the annex.” There might have been minor changes, but the basic premise as to what happened in each of those places was very similar.

EE: What are you most proud of in doing all this work?

SP: What am I most proud of? You know, I really, I don't like to say, "proud of," but I remember when I--. I guess a couple things to be proud of is I guess the fact that I was a good conscientious worker, and I think people spoke highly of me. But I guess probably the thing I was, looking back now, most proud of is Stan McKay—who was one of the big bosses of UGG, was a big boss man so to speak, I guess, you could say—and I remember when I was leaving the employ of United Grain to follow my career, I remember him saying, "You're a good man, Stan. If you ever need a job ever, you come and see me." And when he said that, I was pretty proud of that.

EE: Yeah. That is quite a fine--.

SP: I'm proud of the fact of a good honest day's work and enjoying my work and that sort of thing.

EE: One of the questions in the basic questionnaire is whether you think that the work you did contributed to Canada's success as an international grain trader. [Laughing]

SP: I don't know if I'd be that vain, but I mean the thing is, is that it starts in the bottom and works up. If you didn't have the grain elevators to--. People to grade the grain and to sent it off to people, yeah. But to say that I was responsible for saving starvation in China would be a far stretch.

[0:35:10]

EE: Well, those guys were--. The people doing that were in Vancouver! [Laughs]

SP: Well, there you go. Yeah.

EE: You were helping to feed Russians probably.

SP: Well, there you go. Well, whatever, but.

EE: Slavic brothers and all that sort of thing.

SP: Yeah. But I mean, it's like any industry, you know, the primary industry. I know at the time, and I remember going to school, "The biggest port--. Thunder Bay, the largest elevator in the world." And I kind of made reference to that here in terms of the grains going west and that sort of thing. They're sinking a whole bunch of money into Churchill, and I've been to Churchill, and I know

that the port itself is only available three months of the year because of the extreme conditions and so on. But you know, it is what it is. But I remember the workforce 1,500-1,600, now there's precious few, and elevators have closed down.

EE: Well, it seems to me that when Frank Mazur was supporting my running in '84, he talked about 1,800 on the waterfront.

SP: Yeah. Yeah. Well, and Frank, I remember Frank. Big man.

EE: Oh, yes.

SP: When he'd get up--. And when Frank talked, people listened because he was a big guy.

EE: He was, indeed.

SP: But he would be the kind of fire and brimstone and let's--. I remember Frank well, for sure.

EE: Quite a guy. The changes over the years—of course, it's a fairly short period of time—did you see changes taking place while you were there?

SP: You know, not really. In terms of changes, I mean, personnel changes. They would hire people. People would move on. People would retire. But as far as the actual changes--. When I was there, there was more changes in terms of technology, in terms of having more of the hopper cars as opposed to the boxcars. But I think that was just a natural change. But other than that, I mean, I can't think of any dramatic changes. There probably was, but none that I was aware of.

EE: No, it's over a longer period of time, I'm sure, that one becomes aware. And of course, over 30 years, let's say--.

SP: Well, for sure, yeah.

EE: There was a lot of changes over 30 years.

SP: Oh, no doubt. No doubt.

EE: Were there challenges that you face on the job that--?

SP: Not really. The thing is that--. Not really challenges, like nothing physical in terms of that. But just to be conscientious and do a good job. I mean, you know, like there wasn't a lot of pressure. I mean pressure to do your job and to do it well if that's a challenge. But--.

EE: And you were there, in a sense, towards the end of the heyday of the grain trade probably.

SP: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

EE: Because it did really begin to change around '84 if you will, '83, '85. It declined in fact to the trade to the Atlantic.

SP: Yeah, that was in my rearview mirror then because I was in my educational career.

EE: That's right. You were busy teaching. Well, I've got some other questions about your most vivid memories about your job. You never faced a rat in a blind alley or anything?

SP: No. [Laughing] No, you know, vivid memories. Good fond memories. I mean, nothing dramatic or anything like that. But good people--worked with good people. Kid around. I always have had a sense of humour. You know, if you're working for eight hours, it's good, but if you can have a little fun doing it then it's even better so to speak.

EE: Sure.

SP: And that sort of thing.

EE: Is it important to preserve and share this part of Thunder Bay's history?

SP: I think it is. But I think the thing is that I think it's important to preserve and share it, but part of the generation thing because, you know, it's maybe important to people that have passed on and people that are upcoming, but with the way society is in terms of the change, it's good to kind of know. Really, in light of the fact that there's such a small workforce right now, you know, in terms of the number of people working at the elevators and that, I don't want to say it's meaningful, but it's not maybe as relevant to some as it might be to others because of the smaller workforce and that sort of thing. But I think the distinction of the one time the largest port in the world and the largest elevators that contributed to the Canadian economy, I think that certainly is quite an accomplishment by the collective workers and government at the time. No question.

EE: Yes. And as the workforce declines, as the trade falls off, these memories become rarer of course.

SP: Oh, for sure. Yeah.

EE: As the workers die and whatever--.

SP: Yeah. Can't say, "Well, I've been there done that," because, you know, that sort of thing. So, yeah.

EE: Yeah. I always give Owen a chance to ask any question that he may have. I shouldn't say always. We've come to this to realize that there's wisdom in having--.

OM: Stan, I just wanted to ask about the cleaning machines. How large would they be? Can you describe what they'd look like and their size?

SP: Well, basically, the cleaning machines, there was different kinds, and they were tailored to various grains. Like some were more for oats, and they were like a shaker machine that would shake, and some were just more large cylinders. And they could hold up to maybe two boxcars of grain—take maybe anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes to clean that grain, and it would have to be, of course, inspected to make sure. But you could also adjust them in terms of taking out more seeds or more oats or whatever the case may be. And that's basically it. Like I say, there was different sections and each of them were more for, like, some might be more for oats, and some might be more for durum or grain depending on the kind of grain. But every time that there would be--. You know, they would take in, and they would be checked and ensured that they were clean, and then they were stored. And then of course, when the ships come in, they would be graded again and that sort of thing so. Yeah.

[0:40:20]

EE: Was the UGG A the company's main elevator in Thunder Bay?

SP: Yeah, yeah. Well, they had UGG A and M. Like this is A house and then M was McCabe's.

EE: Right.

SP: But the one that I worked out was the bigger one. And then my understanding was later on down the road, McCabe's went to more computerized. There was very few--. It was all more computerized as opposed to manual labour.

EE: So they chose to upgrade that one.

SP: Yeah. Operate that, upgrade that.

EE: With the equipment.

SP: Yeah, yeah.

EE: I wonder why that happened.

SP: I'm not sure. I don't know. Like I say, if you had somebody like a Bill Belanger or a person that would be involved in that time as management, they might be able to glean more information about that for you. But I'm not sure.

EE: Both of these elevators were served by, what, CP Rail [Canadian Pacific Railway]?

SP: Both CP and CN [Canadian National Railway]. Yeah. They would have people--. People would come in--. Like there would be yardmasters for CN and CP, and we would have both CN--mostly CN--and some CP but depending on the day. And sometimes—a lot of times—it would be availability of cars. Like sometimes it would be difficult to get cars with various whatever the case may be, but they were both CN and CP served. Mostly CN, but depending on the day, there would be more CP than CN.

EE: One can't walk the tracks, at least not legally—you're not supposed to—but it does become a temptation to walk the tracks of T-Bay to get a clearer sense of what goes where.

SP: Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

EE: I was driving out towards Rosslyn Village the other day, and along Rosslyn Road, of course, you get a sense of the lines there. Aerial, good from the air.

OM: Just one other question. How did you get your elevator work in the first place?

SP: How did I get it?

OM: Yeah.

SP: Well, like I say, I worked at a garage in Current River for a number of years. I can tell you more about that--. [Laughs] I worked there, and I think I was in Grade 13 or so. I was going to university or maybe--. And I was looking for--. Like the job I had was good, but I was looking for a decent-paying job. Like I say, Bill Tarnowski was the superintendent, Ray Cousineau was as well, and they knew of me and a few of the other guys that worked at the garage. I guess we applied, and they knew of our work ethic, and got hired on. That was '75. They would hire me back the next two or three years, you know, early in hiring back on. And then got on full time, got my seniority and that. But I mean, that's basically it.

OM: Just showing up to work one day.

SP: Well, I think I had to apply. [Laughing] Applied, and I guess they started me, and of course, I was keen and eager and making a good buck and paying my way through school as I would want to do. Mind you, my first-year tuition—I tell people this—my first year of tuition in '73 was \$665. And my son graduated probably four years ago, and his was \$4,850. So. [Laughs]

EE: Yes. That's changed!

SP: Times have changed.

EE: The fact that it was as small as that still in '75 is an indication--.

SP: Yeah, '73 it was \$665, and then it would have been anyway.

EE: I seem to remember about 15 years before that, tuition was \$300 or something.

SP: yeah, well--.

EE: I guess it had doubled in 15 years or a little more than that.

SP: Yeah.

EE: Is there any question that comes to your mind that I haven't asked?

SP: No, I think basically you hit most of the things that I probably would have said in terms of that. As far as the importance goes, I think the importance at one time was very important. Now it's not nearly because most of the grain goes to the West Coast. It was a good stable environment, stable employment to work at. Like I say, the memories I have of the elevators are fond. I don't have, "Oh, jeez. I have to go to work there," or I dreaded this, or I dreaded that. It was good. You know, the shift work, I didn't mind shift work at all, so it was--. And back then in the day, there was three shifts.

EE: Three eights?

SP: So if you weren't a night owl, you had no choice. I mean, really, that's the way it should be. But you know, I wish you well in terms of gleaning of information in terms of your study and getting a perspective of the grain industry through the people that worked there and the other people you may speak to.

EE: You didn't carry any memorabilia away did you that you'd like to pass on?

SP: No, but I remember my dad, I would sometimes get a little bit of wheat because, you know, make wheat. We called it "schneppsa" or something, some kind of grainy things. So. [Laughs] But no, no I didn't save this or whatever.

OM: You said you had a poem that you wanted to read?

EE: Yes, quite. Thank you, Owen.

SP: Oh, I can share this poem with you if you like.

EE: By all means.

OM: A lost Shakespeare sonnet.

SP: Well, I don't know about that.

EE: And--.

SP: Actually, this is 12 lines. Sonnet has 14. Are you an English dean? No, you're history.

EE: You're right. A sonnet has 14. But you wrote this this morning?

SP: Yeah.

EE: In anticipation?

SP: In anticipation. Just like, you know, the Heinz Ketchup. But lately I have a penchant for writing out poems, but they have to be rhyming couplets as you'll hear in a second. But they're heartfelt, but they also show my thoughts about it rather than just doing this.

[0:45:08]

EE: Sure.

SP: So, anyway. This is called, "A Tribute to the Grain Elevators," and this is just a few of my thoughts. "Changes may come, and changes may go,/ In all walks of life, this is very much so./ A once vital industry to our great port and city/ Is now suffering, and it is a pity./ The grain elevators that once dominated our brighter days/ Now stand almost dormant in many ways./ The days of 24-6 were common to many a sight/ Is a far cry from their current labour plight./ A world leader in the handling and movement of grain,/ Thunder Bay can no longer make this wonderful claim./ The number of workers now number about 150,/ Thank you to these and many others for their efforts, labour, and legacy."

EE: Thank you. Right. Well, thank you very much, Stan, for coming in today and sitting with us and talking about part of your life in the grain trade.

End of interview.