

Narrator: Larry Rayner (LR)

Company Affiliations: Government of Canada—Department of Agriculture; Canadian Grain Commission (CGC)

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Summary: Former Director of Economics at the Canadian Grain Commission Larry Rayner describes his career path from being in the Air Force during World War II, to heading the Crop Insurance branch of the Department of Agriculture, to becoming a director at the CGC. He details the main duties he oversaw at the CGC, including market research, grain statistics, licensing, terminal audits, and grain accounting. Rayner discusses how his major duties also involved learning and staying updated about the grain industry through meetings with grain companies, farmers, and other players. Other topics discussed include sitting on committees for grain tariffs, changes to car allocation and the introduction of producer cars, the restricting of the CGC prior to his arrival, the role of grain accounting agents in port cities like Thunder Bay and Vancouver, the CGC’s weekly statistics bulletin, technological changes, farmers’ interactions with country elevators, distinct attitudes of the different provinces, farmers’ evolving business attitudes, and remembrances of his father on the homestead.

Keywords: Canadian Grain Commission (CGC); Canadian Government—Department of Agriculture; Crop Insurance; Agribusiness; Market research; Economics; Agriculture economics; Grain Statistics; Country grain elevators; Farmer cooperatives; Agriculture cooperatives; Inland terminals; Canadian Wheat Board; Railcar allocation; Grain tariffs; Producer cars; Grain elevator licensing; Grain accounting; Grain elevator audits; Grain inspection; Grain weighing; Grain marketing; Thunder Bay; Vancouver; Winnipeg; Manitoba; Saskatchewan; Alberta; Prince Rupert; British Columbia; Ottawa; Canadian International Grains Institute (CIGI); Technological changes; Grain farmers; Grain producers; World War II veterans; Royal Canadian Air Force

Time, Speaker, Narrative
MC: I’m talking today with Mr. Larry Rayner in his home on Radcliffe in Winnipeg, and this is May 1, 2009. So thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview with us. We’re interested to hear about your specific involvement in the grain industry. And I’m wondering if you could first tell us how you got involved in the grain industry in the first place? What sparked your interest perhaps? What led you to be involved?

LR: Well, initially, I grew up on a homestead in Saskatchewan, and we grew grain and had livestock. So I'm a farm boy,

MC: And how did you get--? Interesting, I'm a farm gal from Saskatchewan too. [Laughing]

LR: Good!

MC: How did you get from the farm to the jobs we know you did just before you retired and so on? What's the story?

LR: The World War came along, and I didn't do too well in my Grade 11, so my father said, "Well, you're not going to sit around and do nothing. You're either going to work or go to school." So I went to a course in Moose Jaw that taught engine mechanics, and then it was pretty easy to go from there and join the Air Force and become a mechanic. But one of the men I respected in the community was the Secretary-Treasurer, and Mr. Curr said, "Why are you thinking of joining up? Why don't you go to university?" And so I--. But anyhow, I joined up, and I was in the service for four and a half years. I got an opportunity to remuster the air crew. I got my wings and my commission, and so I was overseas for quite a few years. That's, of course, where I met my wife. And so when I came--. Even when I was there, I decided that the government would give me support to go to university having had war service. So I went to university in Saskatchewan.

I enrolled in agriculture—not knowing what alternatives there were—but before the first year was out, I decided that I wasn't doing well enough to perhaps go for a master's degree, and I wanted to use all the credits I could. So I learned that they were trying to combine a degree in business admin—that's our science and commerce—with agriculture. So I and some of my friends were some of the first to take advantage of that, and they changed the course from a six-year to a five-year. So in five years, I was able to get two degrees. And they worked very good together, so that helped keep me interested in agriculture.

MC: Well, that's excellent. That would have been quite a while ago to have the university see agribusiness and the importance of commerce in that as a skill.

LR: Yes. And there were certain Ag grads that I corresponded with and got them to help support the idea. So it turned out quite good. I went from the university to the government of Saskatchewan in a management consulting office that they were setting up. And then I couldn't convince myself I wanted to live in Regina all my life, so I went to Alberta, and I ended up working for a big oil company as an accountant. Then I got an unsolicited call to take a position, a research position, in the federal Department of Agriculture. So I went to the interview, and they offered me the job. So that sent me to Ottawa for a while in a market research role. Then I left that—the research job—and worked in a new program called crop insurance the federal government was sponsoring.

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It was a shared-cost program with the provinces, and the federal government would put some in it. And the idea was that a farmer could put some of his own money down and guarantee that he would get a crop against all risk. You know, you get drought, insects, you name it, and we would guarantee maybe 60, 70 percent of what he normally gets. So at least he knew he was going to get his money back. And this was a program to avoid the political process of where there's a disaster and then there's a big political forum and the government has to hand out a little bit of money to everybody. It doesn't do anybody any much good, but it--. So we were trying to avoid that kind of a program. Subsequently, I became director of that program, director of crop insurance. It was while I was working there that I got an unsolicited invitation to go to a competition to go for a job at the Canadian Grain Commission [CGC]. And when they offered it to me as a director, I thought, "Hey, I'd like to get back to the Prairies." [Laughing]

MC: Good stuff!

LR: So I was prepared to leave Ottawa, and I wasn't very capable at learning French, so I thought I would go back out to Winnipeg.

MC: And when was that that you--?

LR: '73.

MC: And then--.

LR: So that's how come I got to the Canadian Grain Commission.

MC: Yeah, yeah. Now just before we got on the Canadian Grain Commission, going back to the crop insurance work that you did. Would that be the beginning of crop insurance for farmers as we know it today?

LR: It was very close to the beginning, yes. The province of Manitoba was the first province to propose it and try and set it up. The federal government went along with it. Then we worked hard to try to get all the other provinces involved in different crops. It was quite a challenge starting with grain and then going to apples or blueberries or you name it, you know. But it was a very interesting job.

MC: How has--. You're saying it's pretty similar to what it is today. Do you know what it is today and how it's different from the inception that--?

LR: I haven't--.

MC: Followed it maybe.

LR: Followed it that close. I think there's been a bit of a tendency to try and make it more of an income support program or get kind of half involved in it. We tried to stay away from that. We were trying to help the large farmer and the small farmer, you know, all farmers.

MC: I see, okay. Then tell me about your work with the Grain Commission. You went in as director. Tell me what was involved in that work.

LR: Well, when I--. I guess when I was interviewed, I asked the person who was interviewing me for the competition—he had been the director—and--.

MC: Who was that do you recall?

LR: That was--. Oh, I keep forgetting it. That was Earl Baxter. I said, "What kind of support do you have in your office?" And also, then he told me about all the senior people he had helping him, you know? I think he was proud to tell me. [Laughing]

MC: His empire!

LR: So that was good news, that I had a good support staff. Well, moving into the office and having a good support staff and everything running, I didn't have to worry too much about the—excuse me—about the day-to-day work, the grain statistics that we were publishing, or the administrative jobs that we were doing. One of my men was in charge of licencing. We licensed all country elevators, and we had a bonding policy where most companies had to carry a bond in case they got into trouble so that the farmers would get paid. Of course, we had the job of looking after the warehouse receipts at terminals, at all terminals, where grain went through.

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And then we did research, whatever research the commissioners needed towards different policies like establishing tariffs. The Canadian Grain Commission was responsible to establish tariffs that the elevators could charge. A good deal of the grain, of course, paid tariffs because it was Wheat Board grain that was being handled through the country elevator system and through the railway and through the terminals. We had a pretty good computer section, data processing section to help handle this and do the printing.

MC: That was back in '73?

LR: That's '73.

MC: They must have been those large--. You had to have a whole room! [Laughs]

LR: I think the calculator, or the computer, would only do about 20 transactions or something. [Laughing]

MC: I was doing my masters about that time, so I know what you mean.

LR: Yeah. In '51 when I went to work for the government of Saskatchewan, one of my projects was to set up their first data processing system in the treasury department and train the staff and get it started, you know. I think the computer machine we had there would only do about 60 calculations-one of the beginnings. [Laughing]

MC: Yes.

LR: Right.

MC: Now, you were responsible, am I correct, for the amassing and dissemination of a lot of statistical bits of information?

LR: Yes, yes.

MC: Was that your primary way you'd--?

LR: That was one of the primary jobs. We put out a weekly grain bulletin, magazine or a little magazine every week. But that had been set up and established, and for me on arriving, that wasn't--. It was something to be aware of, but it wasn't too big a problem unless there was a change in staff and then you had to watch it. I had an assistant director, Swalwell, and he looked after most of the administrative problems and staffing problems and things. So I wasn't too much involved in that. I was mostly involved in

learning what was going on in the grain industry, and who was who, and who was what, and so forth. I was chairman of one committee set up by the Commission to do an analysis of the tariff structure for handling grain, and it meant that I had a committee including some of my staff and some others.

And what I observed mostly in doing that study was that the commissioners over time, you know, different commissioners--. Commissioners were generally political appointments, and if the government changed, they changed. And there was a tendency to keep the tariffs low, and they kept them so low that it was difficult for the grain companies to get along. And then what happened is that the Wheat Board recognized that and started paying extra for country elevators that were handling Wheat Board grain. So that was one of our main recommendations when we finished the report was to say that the Commission should set a maximum tariff. That's their responsibility. And they could set them high enough, higher, so that the companies are going to survive. And secondly, the competition would be such between--. There were three big co-ops and not many--. You know, they handled the bulk of the business. And that there would be enough competition that they probably would all file the same rate, but they wouldn't be excessive. And they subsequently went along with that recommendation.

[0:15:38]

MC: Were there other changes that happened as a consequence of that committee's work? Or was that the major one?

LR: I think that was the major one, yes, as I recall.

MC: And do you have a rough time period when that committee did that work? Roughly when would that be?

LR: Oh. Possibly '75 or '76, I'm guessing.

MC: So that was early in your tenure at the Commission.

LR: Yeah, about halfway through, yes.

MC: So you worked with the Commission from 1973 to your retirement?

LR: I retired in early 1980.

MC: 1980, I see, okay. Were there other significant projects like that committee work on tariff structure? Did you have--. Which were beyond your responsibilities for your managing all your staff and so on. Or maybe that was the main one?

LR: Well, a big part of my job was to meet with different companies and to continue to learn more about what's going on, you know, so that I could then pass on advice to the commissioners if they tended to listen to it. [Laughing] The commissioners were all political appointments, of course, and westerners. They had a tendency to view Ottawa as a huge, huge, important, scary place kind of thing, you know? Myself, having worked there and director of a program where I was often talking to the deputy minister or am talking to the minister—sometimes attended cabinet meetings—I didn't look at Ottawa with the same awe that they did. [Laughs]

MC: Well, that sounds like you had--. Some of the current roles in government they call them intergovernmental-affairs person.

LR: Sort of, yeah.

MC: So were you able to help the commissioners to get a sense of that?

LR: Well, a little, but the commissioners, while they were all political appointments, the three of them were there all the time. I mean, they wanted to be involved almost in day-to-day management.

MC: You mean at the Commission?

LR: At the Commission. So really, each director like myself, we were working for four bosses. There was Earl Baxter, the executive director, and three commissioners. [Laughing]

MC: Did they actually have office space, the commissioners?

LR: Oh, yes.

MC: Oh, they did?

LR: Oh, they had secretaries, and they were there everyday.

MC: Oh.

LR: Yeah.

MC: So how did you manage that?

LR: Well. [Laughing] I have one little favourite story that a good friend of mine who was director of government elevators, and he was an ex-Air Force pilot too. And he had a plane, and he liked to fly. He said to me one day, “Why don’t we go fishing?” I said, “That’s a good idea.” So we took off and went up in northern Manitoba and went fishing for a couple of days. And that meant that we weren’t at work on a Friday, and we didn’t tell anybody. [Laughing] So we got our knuckles rapped for that. [Laughing]

[0:20:05]

MC: And by whom?

LR: Oh, by the commissioners. Yeah

MC: Oh! Not your boss?

LR: One or two of the commissioners. Yeah.

MC: How did you--. You said part of your role was to learn from the companies. How did you go about learning from them?

LR: Most often dealing with their management, and of course, I got to meet them a lot when I was doing that study. The commissioners, especially Del Pound, the chief commissioner, wasn’t too related to the co-ops, but he was quite interested in the people who were in the private companies. So if I went out to Saskatchewan and had a big conference with the directors and with their board, and then of course, the commissioners—especially Del—was very interested in what my observations would be, you know? Excuse me.

MC: That’s quite all right.

LR: I was pretty surprised myself on some things. My father was, as a farmer way back in the days when the Sask Wheat Pool was being formed, he was very active in helping to promote this Sask Wheat Pool because, you know, farmers in those days were hauling grain. Dad was hauling 17 miles with a horse and wagon or a sleigh, and you got into town and there were certain company elevators there, and you had very little leverage. You know, you took what they were prepared to pay. Whereas the Wheat Pool,

being a farmer-owned organization, seemed like a great idea. And so he was very active in supporting it. But later on, when the Pool became more of quite a strong political organization as well as a grain company, he didn't like that. So then he wasn't so bound to the Pool.

I found the same even in this day where I would go to Regina and sit down with the grain manager, management. Plus, I'd sit down with the political organization and the general manager. It always kind of concerned me how much the actual operation of the grain side had to live with the policies of the political side. Now it's of course changed. They're no longer operating that way. The industry, it seemed to me, hadn't changed very much over a lot of years prior to my being involved other than, say, a company like Cargill grain coming in. And it was quite a bit innovative if it could be, you know.

MC: We were talking about learning from the grain companies, and so you would take trips to Saskatchewan--.

LR: And Alberta.

MC: And Alberta. And so you would sit down with these various groups.

LR: Yeah.

MC: What--?

LR: I might add that I had staff in my part of my division that worked in Vancouver in the grain there and staff in Thunder Bay who worked there. And so I spent quite a bit of time going back and forth there to see how--.

MC: Operations were?

LR: The operations were and how they related with the grain companies. And of course, that was an opportunity to meet with the management of the terminals and learn more about their problems and how they handled it, you know?

[0:25:14]

MC: So you were talking in reference to the meetings in Saskatchewan that some of the things that you learned as a farm boy and that your dad thought how it worked, that you gained some new insights when you were able to actually get right in with meeting with the people in charge.

LR: Yes. Yeah.

MC: Could you tell us—if we just think of the grain companies at the moment, and then we'll go back to Thunder Bay and Vancouver—could you tell us what some of those insights that stand out in your mind? Things that surprised you perhaps, or things that you were able to bring back to the Commission or the commissioners that stand out that maybe led to some changes? Or things that surprised you that you weren't happy to know about? [Laughs] Or were key insights.

LR: I suppose one of the areas was the management of the grain company. There would be times where they'd say, "You know, we really don't need that elevator or those elevators on that line." But then the political arm would say, "No, you're not going to close those." So, management had to try and adjust that way. Whichever decision was right, I don't know, but I mean, that was one of the things, because we could see at that time that the grain industry couldn't have an elevator every ten miles, you know? It wasn't horse and buggy anymore.

MC: And in Saskatchewan, those towns are almost every ten miles! [Laughing] Yeah. So you were saying about the relationship between the management, the political arm. Yeah.

LR: And I think the commissioners were always quite interested to try and judge this and try and see, you know, how is the industry changing? Or is it changing, and which way is it going?

MC: Mmhmm. So were there some other key insights with regard to the companies, the grain companies, that you recall? Anything else that stands out. That's a significant one, certainly.

LR: Mmhmm. Well, about this time also, there was beginning to be this trend to build a big terminal, like country terminals they call it. And this was just getting underway, and I think Cargill had built one. And I think there was a group of farmers in Saskatchewan, southern Saskatchewan, had done the same. This was a new trend that was becoming interesting. The other thing that was always quite a factor at the time but didn't really get into my mind or our concern was how the Wheat Board operated car allocation. That could have quite an impact on the results of different companies.

MC: Tell me about that, the car allocation. How did that work? I'm--.

LR: Well, that was done largely by a committee, but the Wheat Board was the biggest power in deciding where the cars went and where they didn't go. Of course, the supply and the railway had an impact too. But during the time I was there, a change occurred,

and the government established a new agency. I had rather thought that the Commission, being the supervisory grain organization probably could have got involved, but I think they decided it was too politically sensitive. So the government set up a new train transportation--. Or I forget. What did they call it? I forget now what they called it. And hired people and gave the director authority to make the final decisions so that the Wheat Board wasn't making the main decision of who got cars and who didn't get cars.

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The other thing that I perhaps should mention while I was there was that we gave increased emphasis to producer cars, where a producer could order a car and load it himself and send it to the terminal, and he would have the warehouse receipt. The grain would be there for him to move or sell later—mostly feed grains, not Board grains. And that--. I had an employee in my office who was responsible for administering that, looking after that, and it grew quite a bit during that period. Then there became a time later where a lot of the producer cars were feed grain that were in the terminal but didn't get moved out very quick, so then that started to bother the terminals that they're taking up space and when they want to load a boat to go down the lake, they'd say they needed some of that grain. So that was one of the interesting things that I enjoyed. I guess I was a bit farmer oriented. [Laughing]

MC: We need more of those! [Laughing] I'm biased too. Uh-huh. So when you talked previously about the change in the allocation of cars from Wheat Board controlling it to the development of a separate group who took charge of that, was that a more fair--? Was there some concerns about how the allocation was done by the Wheat Board in terms of were there lobbying or any unfairness that--?

LR: It's hard for me to judge that, but I think if you asked the various members in the trade at that time, I think they would consider it a little more fair and understandable, because some of the private companies would say to me at times that they found it hard to get a car allocation that they needed, or they wanted. So it's hard to say. I can't really judge that.

MC: No, no.

LR: But I think it probably did level things out a little.

MC: And even—it may be hard to know for sure—but there was a greater perception of fairness by the sounds of it.

LR: I think so.

MC: Yeah. So those relationships with your missions, let's call it, to learn from the grain company, there were a lot of sensitivities there that you were picking up.

LR: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

MC: And were some of those fairly explosive or difficult to--. Or just understanding it was the big issue?

LR: Well, in one area, we were responsible for seeing that licencees—every company that handled grain—was bonded. We did approach to set up a new system that my office was involved in checking this, but it--. We were going to make it more of a--. Use one company and rather pool it with everybody, but that didn't go too far. The cooperatives at that time had their own company, a little cooperative company, that was doing it well. We considered that was really not a lot of financial backing, you know? And then at that time, there were a few grain dealers getting involved. I remember trying to make sure that they had coverage, good coverage. We did mess up on one in one instance where a company in--.

[0:35:50]

MC: Tell us about that. We like to hear the mess ups too. What happened?

LR: Well, this particular dealer was handling a lot of producer cars, and he had quite a bit of grain in Thunder Bay. He kept getting pressured by the companies who were shipping grain out of Thunder Bay to, "Hey, give us some of that grain. Give us some of that grain." So finally, he conceded and did sell them some of the farmer's grain, which the farmer didn't know he had sold. So then the price is changed, of course. He's in trouble because maybe what he sold it for isn't what he's going to have to pay the farmer for. And that did develop into a problem, and next thing you know, he was financially in trouble. I don't think the bond requirements we had on him was enough to cover that. So anyhow he went--. I'm not sure how the whole deal ended, but he went out of business.

MC: Uh-huh. I'm fairly ignorant about these things, but does this bonding still exist?

LR: I believe it does.

MC: It does.

LR: I think it's part of the Canada Grain Act. Yes.

MC: I see. So a lot of delicate manoeuvring too. [Laughing] Yes.

LR: Yeah.

MC: So you talked about learning from these companies in order to advise the commissioners. Those commissioners sounded like perhaps challenging people to work with.

LR: Mmhmm.

MC: Because you weren't working for them, I guess, you were working with them.

LR: Well--.

MC: Or is it perceived the same.

LR: Well, I was probably working for them too because they didn't mind giving me instructions. [Laughing] They were well-informed people, and they were agriculturists and farmers. I thought two of them at least, or three of them, were farmers. So they were pretty well-informed in agriculture. They could talk to a lot of people that I never got a chance to talk to, and of course, they were quite well known politically. The only thing I mentioned was that the commissioners may not have been as well informed of day-to-day things or policies of the co-ops as well as they were of the private companies.

MC: And why was that?

LR: In my opinion.

MC: Why would that be?

LR: I don't know. I don't know.

MC: Could you tell me, just to have on tape, how you would define the role of the commissioner in relationship to the Canada Grain Commission? Is that something you can tell us about?

LR: I guess, in times before I became involved in the Commission, shortly before I came, I guess, there was a bit of a reorganization, or a study done about the Commission. And they established an executive director. Now prior to that, the commissioners really were the managers, and then under the commissioners were division heads—the economics, statistics division, the research division, the inspection, weighing. And when I joined and there was a person who—Earl Baxter—who previously was a director of the economics division became the executive director so that in-- . But that had to be a challenging job for him because the old habits were still there, you know? The commissioners, if they're there and they're in the office everyday, and they're talking to different people too, and they're the ones--.

[0:41:03]

MC: Influence.

LR: They're the ones with the final authority, you know? They would have board meetings or whatever they called them, and we as directors would be asked to attend different subjects. So they were really the three-man-- . The chief commissioner seemed to have the most authority, but nevertheless they were a three-man board.

MC: Who were the commissioners, if you can remember their names—I'm sure you can, I have a feeling—when you were working there?

LR: Well, when I first got there, there was Del Pound, and I think there's Mr. Shuttleworth, and Forrest Hetland. Mr. Shuttleworth was from Manitoba, and Hetland was from Saskatchewan, and Del was from Alberta.

MC: So you're saying just prior to your arrival there was a change then in how the role of the commissioner--? Am I correct in that by creating this executive director position, was it actually taking some of the power away from the commissioners?

LR: It may have that, or it may have centralized a lot of the administrative responsibilities, I think, and day-to-day things that took them away from the commissioner. But I'm sure that Earl checked with them pretty regular, yes. And Mr. Baxter, being there for a long time, he knew the industry very well.

MC: Okay. Well, you talked about you also had to make visits to Thunder Bay and Vancouver. Could you tell us a bit about your relationship with the people in those two settings?

LR: Well, at that time, as far as our staff is concerned, Reg Aldus was in charge of my office in Vancouver, and Bob McLachlan in Thunder Bay. They did quite a good job and a sensitive job because they had to get the records out and get everything done, and yet they're also working for weighing, working for inspection, and working with the companies. But they did a great job in getting the documentation done and accurately and out quickly.

MC: Before we started recording, you were telling me a bit about the logistics of collecting the data. Maybe you can tell me a little bit more about that again in terms of what happened in Thunder Bay and how the grain came and how all that documentation was done, I guess, from the farmer bringing the grain to the country elevator all the way--. This was these individuals' job, correct?

LR: Mmhmm.

MC: To gather some of that. Can you give us a feel for the complexity of that?

[0:45:07]

LR: Well, grain accounting in this grain system was a bit complicated. You had a grain accounting in the country elevator, and then there was--. That was one thing. And then when it got shipped out and it got to Thunder Bay, let's say, or Vancouver, the grain was graded as our inspectors saw it. So that was like a second grain accounting. Some of the grain would change status, change weight. You got rid of dockage. So that was another accounting system. So it always seemed to me the country elevator system had to have one accounting system, then we had another one at the terminal. And then, as I said previously, that periodically an elevator would be shut down, and we would weigh it over and re-grade everything and then adjust the accounting of what was in the elevator at that time and adjust warehouse receipts if they had to be adjusted.

The biggest job that each of these offices had to do was to handle the grain accounting as it arrived into the terminal and as it was going out and the issuing of warehouse receipts and cancelling of warehouse receipts. We used data processing to help a lot. The staff in Vancouver and Thunder Bay would--. Let's say 800 cars got unloaded in Thunder Bay today. Well, by tonight or tomorrow morning, the information on those 800 cars would be communicated to Winnipeg, and then we could send it on to the companies. And each company would get a statement of how their grain turned out and what terminal it was put in. "And here's your warehouse receipt."

MC: Wow.

LR: So that what they loaded out of the country elevators they thought was this, but when it gets there it's what's officially graded and weighed, and dockage taken off there.

MC: So in the country elevator, what did they--. And I can remember as a little kid going in the truck with my dad to the country elevator, and it would be dumped, and they would put something in and--.

LR: They'd take samples.

MC: Take samples to do something. [Laughs]

LR: And the elevator agent would say, "Well, there's--." He would estimate the dockage, and he would say, "I'll give you credit for so much clean grain."

MC: But the quality wasn't assessed?

LR: Oh, yeah.

MC: Oh, it was?

LR: They'd assess the quality, and you would get--.

MC: At the country elevator?

LR: At the country elevator. And that's what the farmer would get paid at, whatever that country elevator said the grade of the grain was.

MC: Okay. So that's what they actually got paid, not what it was evaluated at the terminal?

LR: Oh, no. No, no. The country elevator paid what the country elevator agent determined.

MC: Determined.

LR: Yeah. And another thing that the Commission did is that if a farmer didn't like necessarily the grade that the country elevator gave him, he could send a sample to the Canadian Grain Commission and have it re-graded and sent back, and that's what the country elevator agent would have to settle on. And they did that a certain amount.

MC: I can remember those kinds of discussions as a farm kid about which of the grain elevators and who was the agent and all of that.

LR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yeah. The agent was a pretty important person in getting the grain. That's right.

MC: So the--. Let's just explore that a bit. Do you have a sense when you said, "The agent at the country elevator was a pretty important person for getting the grain," are you meaning something there?

[0:50:04]

LR: Yes. It's like any business probably. It's how he performed, how honest you figured he was, you know?

MC: Favouritism?

LR: Like, why do you go to a certain store or a certain gas station? It's how you get treated. I've seen examples where—that I didn't like too much—where farmers would send grain into an elevator, and the elevator could give them a grade, but maybe just give them a feed grade when the grain could probably easily, you know, wheat could go No. 2 or something. I recall telling one of my friends in Saskatchewan that I went to school with that, "You've got some fairly good-looking wheat there. Why don't you send it in and get a sample checked?" I guess I don't know enough to comment too much on country elevator operations because they vary. And it varies who they had there and who they send around.

MC: Yeah. Well, it was an important player.

LR: Oh, yes.

MC: Because it was the first contact the farmer had with the whole industry.

LR: Right. Yeah.

MC: So very important person. Mmhmm.

LR: If you supported the Pool, you went to the Pool. If you supported another company, you went to another company. Yeah. Went to Pioneer.

MC: Yeah, right. Yes. So all of this grain then moved to Thunder Bay or Vancouver, as you were saying, and there was this complicated accounting system—it seemed like it was complicated—that had a lot of points that could go wrong.

LR: Well--.

MC: It seemed to work.

LR: I don't look at Thunder Bay as being quite that complicated because everything that goes in there has been graded and weighed. That's done anyhow, but it was supervised by Commission people, and then a grain warehouse receipt issued on that basis. So, you know, that was, in my mind, the most authentic time of the whole process.

MC: Right. And so when you started, it was the beginning of the computer age that assisted the processing of this information.

LR: Yeah. Well, the data processing was established pretty well, and it was a little bit of computer work, but mostly it was a way to record it, you know?

MC: Right.

LR: Put it on a punch card and process it that way.

MC: Punch cards, I remember those. [Laughing] Things have changed.

LR: It was all punch cards.

MC: And prior to that, it must have been all manual.

LR: Yes. Yeah.

MC: So did that lead to a decrease in staff?

LR: Yeah. Mmhmm. Yeah, the staff used to say, would tell me about years ago, where they'd have a great big desk, and they're sitting there working at it all day. \

MC: Yeah. [Laughs] So from that flow of information about the types of grains and so on, it came to Winnipeg?

LR: Yes.

MC: And then, of course, there was a responsibility to reply to the companies. But your group also amassed other kinds of information. You mentioned this weekly magazine, but I was looking under whatever the title is for statistics in Commission--.

LR: Yeah. Mmhmm. Statistics.

MC: And there's a lot of historical data, and there's a lot of uses for that information.

LR: Yeah. And the information that came out in the weekly statistics wasn't just what grain moved, where it was, and what was in the internal storage, et cetera, et cetera. Each company was solicited to send in information every week.

MC: Oh, I see.

LR: And that information was added. The main purpose—one of the main purposes—of the weekly publication was to give all of industry an idea of how much grain was where, you know, for marketing or whatever purpose. Yeah.

MC: So the amassing of statistics had a role in the marketing of grain?

[0:55:05]

LR: I think so. Yeah. Oh, certainly. Yeah.

MC: Who would be some of the users of all of this data that you accumulate in Winnipeg?

LR: Well, nearly every company. Every company, they were quite anxious to have this information because they knew what their situation was, but it gave an overall picture. It would show how stocks change or volume changes and what's moving.

MC: And that would influence their decisions in some way?

LR: Well, I'm sure it must, or at least they knew what was going on. Yes.

MC: So would that affect, what, their buying, their selling, their conversations with the farmer? What to grow or--. I don't know. Or do you think there were certain key decisions that--.

LR: Well, the thing is too that there's board grains and then there's non-board grains. So we were trying to cover, you know, cover all. So that was a way to--. We were the only organization that was trying to put it together every week. How accurate it might be--.
[Laughing]

MC: Yeah, yeah, okay. So what would you consider to be some of the major challenges that you had in your job over the time that you were there?

[... audio pauses]

LR: Little bit of this.

MC: Yeah.

LR: Go ahead.

MC: Okay. We just took a little break there, and we're going to continue our discussion of some of the challenges in your workplace.

LR: Shortly after I arrived, the industry had established the Canadian [International] Grains Institute [CIGI], and so I was fortunate enough to be on either the first or second course. That was about the same time as I joined. So that was a great way, a great introduction to the whole industry and what the Commission was involved in and everything. I had a lot of respect for the Grain Institute that they set up because they would bring in people from around the world and people who were involved in buying our grain. And you know, these were up and coming influential people from different countries, and they got a chance to see and learn

our whole grain industry, and how we market, and how it comes out, and what the quality is. They got a chance to go into the labs and see the lab work that we do on making bread or whatever. So that was, to me, a great introduction to start with. I mean, it was what the business is all about. It didn't cover who's who or the politics in the industry, but I found that a great help.

MC: So in terms of challenges, were there any other challenges? You certainly have talked about the commissioners as being a challenge. Anything else that stands out in your mind? Or--.

LR: No, nothing significantly that I can think about at the moment. Actually, I guess, one of the reasons I retired in 1980 was that I felt there weren't too many challenges left, or there weren't too many challenges that I could get an opportunity to work on. So I decided that there was another life. [Laughing]

MC: Yes! Yes. Retirement is good. We've talked about some of the changes that you went through in the time that you worked. Are there any changes—technology, reorganizations, et cetera—that stand out in your mind? Major changes that you experienced over the time you were working in the grain industry that we haven't maybe already talked about? Or have we pretty well covered the changes? There were some technological changes, certainly, with the computers coming in. Were there any changes in how the Commission did its job or the politics of the day that you can think of that--? Have we missed anything?

[1:00:44]

LR: One policy change that occurred during my latter stay, that the commissioners decided that the Grain Commission didn't need government elevators, that we should sell them or get rid of them. We had several government elevators that the Commission was operating. So that was one of the big changes that took place.

MC: Is this a country elevator you're talking about? Or were they--.

LR: They were like country terminals. They were big elevators where they could handle more grain. And I'm not sure--. Well, actually, the elevator at Prince Rupert for shipping, that was a government elevator. So in a sense, the government was running elevators in competition with private industry or the cooperatives. So that was underway and one of the big changes. The other change that sneaks up on you is the computer technology. Everything changes quickly, and the next thing you know, everybody had a machine on their desk.

MC: Right.

LR: And they could take a quick look right away and say, “Oh, yeah. This is how much grain is in terminal so-and-so.” [Laughing]

MC: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

LR: Yeah, so the speed with which information moved and that really changed. It was changing as I left. Industry-wide, I think it was about the time that I left that United Grain Growers [UGG] joined a US company. But I don’t know whether that was significant. That was--. I think a lot of the changes took place later, after I left, in terms of companies.

MC: Okay. The other question that we’re interested in is if you reflect back on your long career, what would you say brought you the greatest satisfaction? What you were maybe most proud of– your greatest joy in this work? Was there something that stands out?

LR: Well, in my overall career, I really can’t say that one activity stands out too much more than another. I really did enjoy being director of crop insurance, and the fact that it was a shared-cost program. So you worked with every province. The thing that I found always very enjoyable was to go to different provinces and discuss a program and try to get a program set up. And how each province is so different, you know? I always say that if you dealt with Manitoba, their attitude was they thought of it first, you know?

[1:05:11]

MC: [Laughs]

LR: If you went to Alberta, “Well, sure. Let’s try it.” You know? “Hey, let’s give it a try.” Saskatchewan was a little more skeptic, and Ontario, well, they knew how to do it themselves. And then the Maritimes, they were unassuming, but you could be talking to a farmer there that could buy you out ten times over, but you’d never know it. He’s just an ordinary, down-to-earth fellow. The attitude, like, the impression you got of the people you dealt with was so different from province to province. My father came from Prince Edward Island, so I had some relatives there. I enjoyed going there. But one of the things that I really enjoyed was the--. People are different, province to province, or they were. I found them that way, you know? Yeah. And BC, that was another different environment, again, altogether. But in that program, in trying to set it up, you were dealing with some officials, but you were also dealing with farmers and farmer committees in laying it out and planning it and getting it set up. I found that part quite interesting.

MC: Mmhmm. Does that have anything to do with your farm background, or is that at all a factor?

LR: I don't know. I don't know.

MC: It's hard to often know.

LR: Yeah, right. Yeah, right. It could be. You know, you grow up on a farm, you seem to be able to make these--. You have these feelings or kind of judgements about the people in the community and who you're dealing with. Of course, I grew up on a homestead, and it was quite a different environment for people to grow up in. Farmers helping one another and went through the Depression, which was a tough time to go through.

MC: Yeah. If you picked a province—you're saying they're all so different or unique in their own way—if you picked a province, could you try to understand why they're different? Is there any one that you could pick out and say, "I think this is why Saskatchewan is a skeptic or Alberta is ready to do it"?"

LR: Yeah. I don't know. In Alberta, perhaps the oil industry, because I was working with an oil company in the late 50s, and things were just starting to get going. I don't know if that had something to do with it because the Alberta government--. When I was working for the Saskatchewan government, the Alberta government was in such bad shape it was almost going broke. Then the oil industry came along and saved them. It all helped at that time. You know, maybe that gave them an independence because agriculture, they couldn't do it on agriculture like Saskatchewan could. I don't know. It was just that the people and the farmers I met, it was just interesting too. I could see the change, and it wasn't just one or two. It seemed to be more prevalent, the attitude that I picked up.

MC: That's fascinating. That's really fascinating.

LR: Mmhmm.

MC: I wonder if those differences are still there. You left in about the '80s, you were talking.

LR: Well, it was really in the late '60s—the '60s and early '70s—that I was working on crop insurance and travelling around.

MC: Right. That's right.

LR: They might be there some still, I think. You know, I think the Maritimers, they look at things a little different than the west. Of course, agriculture is changing. It's changed so much. I mean now, the farm size is so much different, and the inputs are so much. It's an entirely different game.

[1:10:21]

MC: You mentioned earlier on that you—I forget exactly your words—but it was something like that you tended to support the farmer. That was your inclination. Can you talk a bit about farmers and--. I guess I'm trying to get at how farmers see themselves in this scheme of the grain industry. Do you see some ways that they could do things differently or things that they've done well but where they might also change?

LR: Well, I really don't think I can comment on that too much because I've been away for quite a while, and farmers have changed quite a lot. They--.

MC: But in the time that you observed all this.

LR: Yeah. Like, see, one of the things now is that the idea of the Wheat Board and pooling. Now that, over time, has been in a sense a good idea, and I think, personally, overall, it's made money for Saskatchewan farmers overall. But today there's more and more farmers that say, "Well, if I didn't have to market through the Board, I could just take it and make more money, at least at this time." You know, whether it's always going to be that way--. But I don't have that fairly close contact with farmers to be able to--. Other than I know they have to be a lot larger scale and longer scale. Bigger scale, I mean to say. I have some friends that are still farming that I keep contact with, but that's a small sample. [Laughs]

MC: Yeah. Well, that was maybe a difficult one to ask you. As we come to the end of this interview, we always like to ask you if there's anything else you'd like to be sure to have recorded that we maybe haven't touched on? Or have we pretty well covered it?

LR: I really can't think of anything else.

MC: Anything else?

LR: At the moment.

MC: Okay, okay. The final thing that we always ask is if you might have any memorabilia, photograph albums? Perhaps if you were in Thunder Bay or out in the West Coast, any interesting memorabilia that you could share with us that might enrich our understanding of the industry? Sometimes people have taken photographs of things years ago that could be thrown out [laughs] of your house or whatever that we could preserve. Nothing comes to your mind?

LR: No, nothing--.

MC: Nothing in particular?

LR: Particularly comes to my mind, although I do have a photograph of my father driving four oxen breaking Prairie grain. Breaking Prairie sod.

MC: Ah. That would be wonderful. That would be wonderful. On the homestead?

LR: Well, he was doing it. I think it was he was doing it in the neighbourhood of where he farmed, but I don't think it was necessarily his homestead. I think he was doing it on custom.

MC: Somebody else--. Custom.

LR: He was doing custom with a two-bottom plow and four oxen.

MC: Right. And where was the homestead?

LR: It was in Saskatchewan between the Saskatchewan River and the town of Morris.

[1:15:03]

MC: Morris.

LR: Morris is between Moose Jaw and Swift Current, in that area.

MC: I see.

LR: Along the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] railway line.

MC: Ah, yes.

LR: His farm was about 17 miles north of Morris. I think it was more like 20 some miles to go to Riverhurst, which was the next railway station. So that's how far he used to go. When he first started farming there, the Saskatchewan River--. At one time, some of the farmers on the north side of the Saskatchewan River in the wintertime they would haul grain across the ice, and it'd be about a 35 mile trip to the elevators on the main CPR line at Morris. They'd have to stay overnight. Sometimes they couldn't make it all in one day and then back again. And if you happened to be driving oxen—which don't have very good footing—that was difficult too. So when I think back of how the farmers started, they would grow grain and then had to try and rely on the marketing system to get their money. It was pretty trying. My father, he finally went from oxen to horses, and we always had some good horses even though we had automobiles as well. He was a fairly progressive farmer in that he had his first tractor and combine in 1927 or '28. That old combine did all the harvesting up until about the mid-50s [Laughs]

MC: Wow. Amazing, isn't it?

LR: Yeah, right.

MC: Well, I'd love to see that picture, and maybe we can close on that note.

LR: Okay, okay.

MC: And I'd just like to thank you very much for your time today in giving those rich insights into your work and some of the personalities you worked with. So thank you very much.

LR: I'm just sorry I can't remember more. [Laughs]

MC: Well, I think we've recorded a lot of interesting ideas, and that's just great. Thank you very much.

LR: Ok. Thank you.

End of interview.

