Narrator: George Richardson (GR)

Company Affiliations: Richardson International

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Summary: Owner of Richardson International George Richardson discusses his and his family's deep connection to Canada's grain industry. He shares the history of how the Richardson company got started in Kingston and expanded the business into the western provinces. He describes his time as a university student working in Richardson Elevator in Thunder Bay, and he recounts how this experience informed his desire to improve the company through projects like screening pelletization, dust control, and equipment improvements. He recalls his father and mother's positions as head of the company, as well as his own work in the company's global offices. Richardson shares stories of major events during his career, like painting country and terminal elevators orange and yellow, securing one of the first Canadian grain contracts with China, building and ocean-going laker in Scotland, and building a state-of-the-art terminal in British Columbia. He discusses Richardson's connections to the Canadian Grain Commission, Canadian Wheat Board, railways, grain researchers, and other grain companies. Other topics discusses include Canada's reputation for quality grain, other industries Richardson International is involved in, the sale of the Richardson ship fleet, the growth of the canola market, and more stories of his time at the head of Richardson International.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative

NP: Introducing this session on October 21, 2009, with Mr. George Richardson at his beautiful home on the Red River just outside of Winnipeg, Manitoba. I'd like to start the interview by asking Mr. Richardson to introduce himself and to talk about his involvement in the grain industry.

GR: Thank you. My name is George Richardson. I've really been involved in the grain trade all my life. I grew up in it, and I've lived it all my life, and I'm still fairly active in it. So, that's quite a few years.

NP: And your family, it would be no surprise to anyone who knows anything about the grain industry in Canada, that your family is really one of the founding families of the grain industry. Can you tell us a bit about the Richardson's history with the grain industry?

GR: Well, the James A. Richardson that started the firm came over as a young boy from Ireland and was raised by relatives in Canada. He was trained as a tailor, and he thought if he was going to be in the tailoring business, he would move to Kingston, Ontario because that was the military capital of Canada. He didn't think that the local people would want many clothes custom made, but he knew if the military were there they would. So, he went to Kingston, hung out his shingle, and made clothes for the military, then gradually started making clothes for the local people. They didn't have very much money. They had grain. So, they soon started paying in sacks of barley or wheat for their clothes. So, the founder of the firm started a warehouse and started storing the grain. Then he started selling the grain, and he found out there was more money in the grain business than there was in making clothes. So, he really stopped being a tailor and entered the grain business.

NP: So, when approximately was this that he moved from Ireland over to Canada?

GR: Well, he started the company in 1857. So, we're over 150 years old.

NP: And that was in Kingston?

GR: Kingston, Ontario. The company has always been run and directed by members of the family.

NP: Are you unique in the Canadian grain industry?

GR: I think we're the oldest company still in the business, yes.

NP: A lot of changes, including they're no longer in Kingston. So, some changes occurred to move the--.

GR: Well, the first elevator that the company owned was built in Kingston. There was a—I don't want to say a fleet—but some sailing boats that sailed with the grain across to the American side. So, that's where the first elevator was at the foot of Princess Street.

NP: Long gone now?

GR: Yes.

NP: Then what was the next step?

GR: Well, there was an agent out in Winnipeg buying grain, an agent of the company. It was west of Winnipeg before the railway and bought grain there, moved it to the river, and moved it by barge down the Red River into the United States.

NP: Through Duluth?

GR: I'm sorry, I can't know where. It just went in the United States.

NP: Somewhere, the head of the lake sort of.

GR: Well, not necessarily.

NP: Oh, I guess not. Way back then.

GR: Way back when, it just went to the United States. There were elevator sites picked out before the railway.

NP: Where were they?

GR: Oh, I should be able to tell you that, but I can't remember.

NP: Whatever you remember or don't remember, it doesn't matter.

GR: I don't remember where they were.

NP: On the American side?

GR: No, no, on the Canadian side.

NP: On the Canadian side.

[0:05:05]

GR: So, very, very fortunately, when I was in my university years in Manitoba, the last two years in the summer I went to what was then Port Arthur. Thunder Bay used to be Port Arthur and Fort William, and so I may call it Port Arthur occasionally because that's what it used to be. I went there to work in the elevator. I didn't have any specific job, but I moved throughout the whole elevator. If there was a man off, that's where I went to see if I could help the people and learn something about the elevator. It was a wonderful experience.

NP: This was the Richardson's Elevator on the Port Arthur waterfront?

GR: Yes, yes.

NP: You were in university during what years? I'm just trying to get sort of an idea of--.

GR: 1940 to '46.

NP: So, does the elevator today look the same as the elevator did then when you worked at it? Or were there--?

GR: No, it's much larger and much different because they put--. Back on the university, I started at Manitoba and then I went to Queens, but I'd had a football accident, and I'd damaged my back. So, I found it a great difficulty getting to classes in Queens. Finally, they sent me up to Toronto where I had a spinal fusion, and then I came back to—as I had to recuperate—I came back to Winnipeg. Instead of going back to Queens I went back to Manitoba.

NP: Tell me a bit more about your experience at the elevator. Was that the first you'd been in a terminal elevator, that summer you worked there?

GR: Yes.

NP: So, can you even think back to your first impressions and--?

GR: Well, yes, I can. It was very interesting, and it seemed to me there were a lot of things could be done to improve things, particularly refuse screenings. You know what I mean by refuse screenings? That's the tail-end of the screenings process. It was the wheat seeds and the dust in the elevator that were collected. In those days, they were all collected and shipped by boat to the American side. There were no refuse screenings used in Canada or shipped in Canada. It was a dangerous business and a hazardous business.

One of my experiences in one of those years I was down there, these refuse screenings used to go into the concrete tanks and be stored to be collected there. They would not all run out if they were in there and at all damp, they would bridge up. When they went to empty the tank, about 60 or 70 feet down the tank—they were about 90 feet up tall—there'd be screenings and a very small hole in the centre where they'd drawn out, but the rest were stuck around the tank. Believe it or not, a man used to go down, lowered down in a chair—mechanically, properly—but he had nothing but a pickaxe. He'd go down and he'd swing in the chair and hammer at the screenings until they broke loose. I went down one time to experience what they were going through, and I decided there has to be another way. That's a long story, but another one.

NP: So, what was the other way you say things being handled? Oh, first of all, before you do that, what was the market on the American side? What were they using the screenings for?

GR: I really don't know. They all went to one place. I think it was Duluth. They were processing them, doing something with them. Every elevator, not just ours, but all the refuse screenings in Port Arthur and Fort William went by boat down to the American side.

[0:10:15]

So, I got thinking about the problem, and thinking these wheat seeds grow on the same land that the grain grows. The dust comes off and it's very dangerous, very inflammable, very explosive, and very hard on the men working near it. So, I wondered why it wasn't used for cattle feed in Canada. They said, "Well, the cattle won't eat it because it doesn't have any nutritive value." Well, being a little stubborn, I sent some out for analysis. I'm sorry I can't remember the exact analysis we got back, but it was very nutritional, particularly the wheat seeds. I said, "Why doesn't somebody--?" "Well, it doesn't taste very good. Cattle won't eat it." Well, I couldn't believe that. If they were hungry enough, I thought they'd eat it. So, I had some ground and shipped to Winnipeg.

We used to have a ranch up north of the city where we had about 600 head of cattle in the wintertime. The cattle had sheds for the night, but in the daytime, they were out in the woods where they were fed hay. So, I put the screenings in the back of my car and drove out there one winter day. I drove out to the woods where there were no cattle—they were all loose and free to move—and I emptied my four bags of ground refuse screenings on the snow. Well, in no time at all, there was 400 head of cattle trying to get a mouthful of screenings. I said, "They'll eat them. Now we have to get them processed because this isn't the way to ship them." So, I got in touch with the California pellet mill company and said, "Can we design a pellet mill that will pellet these refuse screenings, and they will be ground but that won't devitalize all the wheat seeds?" So, we have to make a thick enough, deep enough dye that it will generate enough heat that as the screenings are pressed through the dye, the heat generated will destroy any weed seeds that are left because there must be no weed seeds that will germinate when the screenings are produced.

NP: And why is it so important that they don't germinate?

GR: Because we were going to sell them for animal feed. We were going to be taking weed seeds out of the grain that had been shipped to the terminal, and then shipping the refuse screenings pellets back to the country—at least I thought they would go back to the country—where they'd be used for feed, and they would germinate and grow on the land again. So, it was very important to be able to guarantee there were no viable weed seeds in the product. So, the pellet mill company really worked on it. We developed a deeper dye, or a thicker dye, and it generated enough heat that after many trials nothing would germinate. The interesting thing was screenings used to be worth just a very few dollars a tonne. Believe it or not, we started--. Well, going back a little bit, I decided we had to do it right. We had to not collect them in tanks. We had to take the refuse screenings right from where they were produced into a pellet mill where they were made into pellets because then they weren't explosive, and they could be stored, and they could be accumulated.

NP: Going back—again I've been in elevators, but I'm not an expert on how they work—so, are those refuse you call them?

GR: Refuse, yeah.

NP: Screenings, are they created all the way through the process in the elevator, or is there a certain spot where it makes sense to take them off?

[0:15:07]

GR: It's the final product of cleaning. The grain may be cleaned, and those cleanings will be cleaned again and again. They may be cleaned two or three times. So, refuse is the final cleaning result.

NP: And then were they taken by conveyor belt—initially—conveyor belt into the bins that you talked about?

GR: Yes.

NP: Okay. And now with the pellet, they were re-streamed towards a pellet mill instead of the bins?

GR: Well, I decided that they were going to be done and done properly. We'd build a separate building. So, it wasn't in the elevator, it was external. As the refuse screenings were produced, they were put right out by spout into the pellet mill. But the pellet mill, because it was a new building and was quite expensive, and we weren't going to generate enough refuse screenings to make it profitable. So, believe it or not, I made an arrangement with the Manitoba Pool and the Saskatchewan Pool that we would participate in their refuse screenings. We would relieve them of the product, and they would participate. The arrangement—I forget, I think it was for ten years—was that we would get their screenings at a certain price, we would add our pelleting cost, and we would sell them, and they would participate with us in half the profit over this price. So, that worked very well and gave us enough product. I don't remember the exact figures, but having been worth a few dollars a tonne, once ground and pelleted we had them over $200 a tonne for export. We sold cargos to Europe, and a lot of them went to Japan. Full cargo of refuse screenings pellets.

NP: So, as you're talking, I'm thinking about the Richardson Elevator in Thunder Bay, and this is where the pellet mill is that you were talking about?

GR: Well, it was on the east side, yes.

NP: Closer to the water then?

GR: Yes.

NP: Oh, okay. I'll look for it next time.

GR: All right. It's still there.

NP: I've taken a tour of the elevator, but we've never--. Either I wasn't paying much attention or didn't point out the pellet mill, so.

GR: Well, it became such a profitable game and such a useful game because to get them from the Manitoba Pool and Saskatchewan Pool they had to load them in boxcars. They came over to our elevator and went to the pellet mill and had to be unloaded. Well, that created dust and nuisance. So, after the original agreement, they put in their own pellet mills. I think all the terminals at Thunder Bay now have a pellet mill. I think, I'm not sure.

NP: Yeah, probably the larger ones would.

GR: The larger ones all do because it was such a sensible way to get rid of their product.

NP: So, you were barely out of university when you designed this system, or helped design this system?

GR: Well, my experience in the summers down there was a big help.

NP: So, you said that you, well, you sat in the chair and got lowered down to knock off the screenings, what other jobs did you do?

GR: Well, I go back so far that the grain all came in boxcars with wooden grain doors. The ridiculous thing was in order to get the grain out efficiently, you had to cut the grain door apart. There was a good wooden grain door cut apart. My simple mind said to me, "There must be a way to take that grain door out without destroying it." So, with our very competent people at the elevator, we got a steel beam that a man could lift with a piece on the end, about 10x10. When the grain car moved in, he put that inner brace behind you, and as the grain car moved past, the steel beam lifted the grain door up and let the grain run out. It saved the grain door. Before there was a lot of wooden junk to dispose of—got rid of all that problem. The grain door was saved and put back in and used over again. It was a money maker all around.

[0:20:45]

NP: Right. Did other companies adopt the system?

GR: Well, a little later on they started putting in dumpers, and I'm not sure what they--.

NP: The dumpers that then didn't require it to come out the door—the grain to come out the door?

GR: Well, it still had to come out the door, so they had to take the door off.

NP: Ah, but it tilted this way, yeah.

GR: Instead of a man going in with a shovel, that was another--.

NP: Did you do that? Did you shovel grain?

GR: I did, and I said, "There's got to be a better way." [Laughing] Because you had a wooden shovel on the end of a cable, and after the grain had run out of the car, one or two men stepped into the car and one backed in where the grain was still in the end, put the shovel down, and they moved the shovel in a certain way. When I say shovel, it was a piece of wood with two handles on it, and you moved it in a certain way and that started the cable to pull it. The cable pulled it to the door and the grain ran out the door.

NP: I understand from other interviews that that also was a pretty dangerous job working with those?

GR: Yes, it was because if you got your foot caught or anything went wrong, yes, it was. And it seemed so stupid because there had to--. That was the game before car dumpers.

NP: So, you worked in the track shed, you worked--.

GR: I worked every place in the elevator.

NP: Bin floor?

GR: Yes. Inspection office and the whole--.

NP: Oh, did you? Did you have a favourite?

GR: No, it was a learning process. Wonderful people trying to help me learn. I can't say enough about them.

NP: And the fact that you were the owner's son wasn't a strike against you?

GR: No, I think it was an asset because they wanted the owner's son to know what they were doing, and how they were doing it, and what to do. A lot of the ideas of improvement came from people.

NP: The people who were doing it day in and day out.

GR: Yes! They were anxious to try and teach the owner's son.

NP: You sounded like a pretty quick study.

GR: Well, my father had died in 1939 and I was only 15 at the time, so my mother was running the company, and I was doing what help I could.

NP: Were you the oldest child?

GR: No, no, I was the third. An older brother and an older sister, and a younger sister that's still living in the city.

NP: So, a couple of questions are raised by those comments. Your mom taking over the business, that must have been a little unusual in those days for a woman to be running--?

GR: Very much so. It was a little unusual. There were two men in the office that were debating which one of them was going to become the president. Three days after my father died, my mother showed up at the office and she said, "You two can stop talking and stop wondering because I have become the president."

NP: What was your mom's name?

GR: Muriel.

NP: Muriel. And--.

GR: Muriel Sprague.

NP: Sprague?

GR: Muriel Sprague Richardson, yes.

NP: What was her background?

GR: Well, I'm digressing all over the place.

NP: That's okay, that's okay! This is a story that a lot of people don't know.

[0:24:55]

GR: This property is called Briarmede, and my father bought the property in 1916. It was all woods and trees, and it wasn't farmed in those days, it just had to be broken. Anyway, he bought it and enjoyed coming out for weekends—that's about all the time he had to come out. He phoned his sister, who lived in Kingston, who he had [inaudible], and he said he bought this place and he wondered what to call it. Could she think of a name? Well, she said, "I can think of a name, but--." At this stage, this was during the war, his sister was running a rehab place for gassed soldiers at her summer camp at Fettercairn. She said, "There's a lady here helping me, a volunteer that's helping me, that I think would name it better than I would. So, I'll get her to call you." Her name was Muriel Sprague.

And so, my mother called my father-to-be and said, "Describe the property." Well, he said, "There's some fields and some meadows and all sorts of wild roses growing everywhere." Well, she said, "I'd call it Briarmede." They hadn't met at that stage, but a little later he went down and was there and they met, fell in love, and got married.

NP: The rest is history!

GR: The rest is history!

NP: So, did your mom—I think it was really quite special of her to step into your dad's shoes—was she sort of a silent partner during their marriage, as far as the business was concerned?

GR: Well, yes, but business was discussed at the dinner table every night. My father used to talk about what had happened, and there was only one thing—you could listen, and you could ask questions, but you couldn't tell anybody or repeat anything that was said. So, my mother was very familiar with everything that was going on. Again, I'm digressing, but my father was in the airline business, Western Canadian Airways—then Canadian Airways became CP Air—and the Winnipeg National Airport is named after my father for his airline business back in those days. His co-owner that formed Western Canadian Airways in 1926 was my mother. So, mother and father formed Western Canadian Airways, so she knew that business pretty well too.

NP: Did you ever talk to her, in the later years, about was she afraid? Did she ever have second thoughts about stepping in?

GR: No, she started many things in the company which were really the first in companies in Canada. She started a pension plan way back when and started a charitable giving program that every company paid a percentage of its earnings every year into head office that was used for donations. Originally, it was to buy books for schools and universities.

NP: What a lady!

GR: Yes.

NP: A very special person.

GR: And anybody asked her why, she said, "I'm nothing but the bridge between their father and my sons." So.

NP: So, how long did she stay at the helm of the operation?

GR: I think she did 26 or 28 years.

NP: Wow. Now, Richardson's, as you had mentioned, they were into the airlines and just like you jumped around a bit. So, we had the company starting up in Kingston, and then the agent here acting as a bridge, but at some point, the Richardsons moved west.

[0:30:13]

GR: Yes.

NP: So, that was your father that moved west?

GR: Yes.

NP: And was it around 1916 or earlier than that?

GR: Oh, earlier than that. He bought this place in 1916--.

NP: But he'd been here for a while?

GR: He'd been here for a while before that because he'd figured out that by then the two railways were running through Winnipeg, and Winnipeg was going to be the centre of the grain trade. This was the place to be. And the airline experience was that he didn't think--. The American airlines were very anxious to get into Canada and dominate the airline business. In those days, it wasn't like it is today at all, but my father being true and true Canadian, didn't think the Americans should have Canadian airlines. So, his interest in the airlines was, one, to help develop the north, and two, to keep the American companies from coming in.

NP: Was that considered sort of a sidelight to the grain business then? Was that sort of their first diversification project?

GR: Yes, probably that's right.

NP: Your dad couldn't have been very old when he passed away.

GR: 54.

NP: 54. Hm. And you had older brothers, I heard that properly?

GR: Yes, yes. One, and an older sister.

NP: How old was he at the time that your dad passed away?

GR: I was 15, he'd be 17.

NP: Okay. So, not quite ready to move into the business.

GR: Oh, no, no, no.

NP: Richardson's company in those early days, did they build their own rural elevators, or did they buy out?

GR: Nope, built them.

NP: Built them?

GR: Yes. I'm digressing a little bit. Our coloured elevators are rather unique, and that has come about because we used to have a man in charge of maintenance by the name of Claude Cruickshank, and his wife was an interior decorator. One Sunday way back when, they went driving around Manitoba, just looking at elevators. His wife said, "Claude, you've got to do something to improve these elevators. Everybody painted their wooden country elevators with CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] red. You've got to do something to improve the colour of these towns! It wouldn't cost any more to put them coloured than paint them red. You paint it every four or five years, so do something about it." He said, "Well, dear, what colour would you paint them?" And she thought for a minute, looked around. "Well," she said, "I'd paint the main building the colour of my slacks, and I'd paint the roof the colour of my blouse." "Well, we'll see what we can do."

Well, I was involved in the company at the time, and he came to me, and I said, "It sounds like a great idea!" So, that winter we had samples of orange paint and yellow paint in the office, and we dipped shingles in them and matched them up as they dried to see how they would look. In the spring we picked two and decided we'd paint three elevators. Don't ask me what three towns. [Laughing] I should know, but I don't. I can't remember. So, we sent the paint crews out to paint these elevators, and one after the other, all three elevator managers phoned in and resigned. They said they were the whole talk of the community. We said, "Just don't resign. Stay tough. Let's see what it's going to do for the business." I remember I got the call from one man, he said, "I just can't take it anymore!" He said, "One of my big clients called in this morning—he lives 12 miles out of town—he turned out of his driveway, and he looked towards town, and he said, 'I can see the elevator!'" I said, "Well, we've got it. We've got it. So, just hang tough." And he did. So, that's where the orange and yellow came from.

[0:35:35]

NP: I remember when the Richardson elevator in Thunder Bay, which is not a tiny little elevator, was painted in those colours. A little bit more subdued, I think.

GR: Only because it didn't show up so well on the concrete. Oh, I was very much involved in that, so.

NP: The elevator in Thunder Bay, was that the first Richardson's terminal elevator?

GR: Yes. Built, I think, about 1917.

NP: That'd be about right. But you were shipping grain out of Thunder Bay before that?

GR: Oh, yes.

NP: So, how did that--?

GR: Well, somebody else's elevator.

NP: Am I correct in--. I've read a lot of material about the early days, the history, and was Richardson's involved in shipping the first shipment out of Thunder Bay from the Prairies after the trains went through? Is that something--?

GR: Yes. I can't give you the details, but yes.

NP: Yeah, I thought they did, and I think it was through another elevator that it--. Well, the earliest one there, I think, was the King Horn elevator, just a little bit south of where Richardson's Elevator is today. That was a pretty major financial commitment to build that elevator.

GR: Well, it was built in stages. My father walked the lakeshore to pick the site. I remember him talking about walking up and sizing up where it should be, and fortunately he bought enough property that we were able to develop it.

NP: Did he say anything about what criteria he used to pick a site?

GR: Good water and no currents or river or anything. Good access from the lake, so the ships could come right in. The first annex was built, and then I was involved in building the second to enlarge it and putting the refuse screenings plant in and the car dumper. Then we had to deepen the slip.

NP: Was it simply a question of dredging it? Or is that one of the ones where they actually hit bedrock?

GR: No, we just dredged it.

NP: So, that was a good choice too on his part.

GR: Yes, that was part of it. Good water all the way in.

NP: Your early career in the terminal elevator there would have been about the time that there was a very serious explosion in Thunder Bay. 1945 there was a--.

GR: Pool 4.

NP: Yes. Do you recall anything about that and repercussions?

GR: Yes. It was grain screenings, dust, that blew the elevator. So, it was just more incentive to handle them in a better way.

NP: Is that the elevator just down from Richardson's?

GR: Right next door.

NP: So, I would think the employees at Richardson's could feel the force of the blast?

GR: Oh, yes. Blew out some windows.

NP: Did it?

GR: As I recall, yes.

NP: Was that the start, also, of a push towards improving the air quality and dust control?

GR: Yes, yes.

NP: And how did that impact the company?

GR: Well, we just did it. Very happy to do it because the men were working in conditions that shouldn't be tolerated if they could be improved. So, there was quite a business to put in the dust control systems, and again, collect the dust and handle the dust properly.

[0:40:17]

NP: And it made a big difference?

GR: Oh, yes. If it was finally made to work properly.

NP: Oh, trial and error?

GR: Yes. It wasn't easy to do. And one of the other things I remember in the terminal, in the distribution floor there were big spouts that came down to the top of the holding bins in the main part of the elevator that were moved by the men from one bin to the other. But I watched them struggle and do this, and I said, "You know, if those had wheels, they'd move better."

NP: I noticed the wheels.

GR: Well, I know how they got there because the wheels would go up and down. So, once they got into the hole on the bin, the wheels could be moved, but when they were moved to another bin, you could put the wheels down and just roll them across. Made all the difference in the world.

NP: Who designed the system?

GR: I couldn't tell you, but I know who motivated them. [Laughing]

NP: So, once again, you said, "There must be a better way!"

GR: Well, the men were being asked to do things they didn't have to do, and some of them were getting hurt doing it.

NP: That's right, I don't imagine that piece of equipment was light.

GR: No, it wasn't. It was all they could do to move it.

NP: What was Richardson's workforce like at your elevator? Like was it the diverse sort of Thunder Bay working group?

GR: Well, I guess so, but we have some wonderful records of service down there. We have some of the present personnel are third generation. Their grandfather was there, and their father was there, and now they're there. So, we're very, very happy,

NP: I think, from what I've heard both from employees there and just the talk around the grain industry, there's a really special connection between Richardson's and Thunder Bay.

GR: Well, yes, I think there is. Port Arthur. [Laughing]

NP: Port Arthur! Well, I'm a Fort William girl, so I have to stretch it a bit. Your own career then. So, once you did your apprenticeship in the terminal elevator how did your career unfold in the Richardson's operation?

GR: Well, as I say, my father died so my mother was running the company, and she was fully engaged in that. I just worked in different places. I worked for a while over in London because we had an export office in London, worked in Montreal for a time, worked in Toronto, worked in Vancouver. I was basically based in Winnipeg, and if mother wondered what the situation was in some place, "George, will you go and see what's going on?"

NP: Was your brother involved in the grain side?

GR: No, he was really involved in more external things, then he went into politics.

NP: Oh, okay. The other James Richardson. Was your brother a James?

GR: Yes.

NP: So, tell me about--. I don't think I've talked to anybody who's been sort of stationed in London related to the Canadian grain trade, so what was that business like? Who do you interact with, what kind of things you do?

GR: Well, we were involved in selling grain to British millers and French and everybody from--. 24 St. Mary's Ave was the address, and it was called Heatley & Company Limited. We send our cables there offering grain and they would be in touch with the local people that bought grain.

[0:45:09]

NP: Was it intense competition with, well, other countries, I guess? Or--?

GR: Other countries and--.

NP: What made the sale, usually?

GR: Price. Some of our customers were very loyal, and if they wanted the grain and you were very close, they'd give you the benefit of the doubt and maybe pay an eighth or a quarter of a cent more than they could buy it from somebody else because they'd know that you were servicing them all the time.

NP: So, a certain customer loyalty because of good service, they recognized the importance of that.

GR: Yes, yes.

NP: How long did you spend there, in London?

GR: Oh, not long in any one time, but a number of trips over.

NP: I have a question here about describing the typical day in your work, but I don't think there would be such a thing as a typical day in your work.

GR: No.

NP: No, so we'll skip over that one. What would you say are the ingredients of a successful Canadian grain company?

GR: Contacts and service to the client, and the right commodity at the right price at the right time.

NP: Do you have to expand, do you think, to be successful?

GR: No, but--. Well—this isn't meant to be boastful, it's just trying to be factual—at one stage in the Pioneer, which is our elevator company, we had 420 country elevators. With the changes in the business today, we're handling a higher percentage of Canadian crop with 56.

NP: So, although growth might not be important, certainly change is.

GR: Yes, and the ability to load a unit train because you get an advantage in the freight rate. If you can load 112 cars, they would move the train in on your track and the crew would just go away and they'd leave the train, and you'd load it and then they'd come back and pick it up and haul it out. One of the interesting things, which a different part of the world but, the first Canadian wheat sale to China I happened to be able to make it.

NP: Oh, how did that unfold?

GR: Well, with a little good luck. We were in the securities business as well, and in the early sixties I had opened a securities office in Hong Kong. At that time, the Chinese government were trying to change their agricultural business and make it national and do all sorts of things to it, and it was a disaster for the Chinese people. They were starving to death, and they were desperately in need of grain to feed their people. I'm not sure how I got word, but I think through our securities office in Hong Kong the Chinese government had determined to trade with the western world because they thought it would be good for their image. Well, the western world was America and Canada, and the American government would not trade with China at that time. So, that gave me a clue that maybe there was something that Canada could do. So, I told my mother I thought I'd go to Hong Kong to see if I could sell some wheat, and she thought it might be a good idea.

[0:50:17]

So, off I went. Through our man that dealt with our securities office, I got an appointment with Mr. Ting, who was in Hong Kong but the chief buying man for the Chinese government. This was in June in the early '60s. Mr. Ting invited me to have lunch at his office. Well, you may or may not know that you never talk business at lunch in China.

NP: Oh. And did you know this?

GR: Oh, yes. I'd been briefed. You don't talk--. So, as soon as we'd finished an excellent lunch at a very elaborate office, I said, "Mr. Ting, could we go into a business office and talk business for a few minutes?" And he said "Yes." So in we went—and this was in June—and they were interested in wheat for October and November. So, in a very few minutes we had made the largest sale that I have ever made of Canadian wheat. We shook hands, and I said, "Mr. Ting, I'm sorry I'm leaving on a plane to go back to Canada in about an hour and a half, so I can write something out in longhand, or I can send you a cable from Tokyo where we land, or I'll send you the proper documents tomorrow from Vancouver." He said, "Mr. Richardson, nothing further is necessary. You and I have shaken hands on a deal, and in October and November you will ship the wheat, and when called for it, we will pay for it." And that transaction was never recorded. It was never a thing on a piece of paper. And true to their word, we bought the grain from the Wheat Board in Vancouver and loaded it on a vessel, which they sent, cabled for money, *clap*, and back it came.

NP: How was that met at head office when you said "No paperwork necessary" in a system that runs on paperwork?

GR: I think I was head office largely at that stage, so what I said went. [Laughing]

NP: Ah, good! You just had a sense, or you thought the gamble was worth it?

GR: We had not too much to lose, and again I don't want to sound boastful, but it serves in very good stead with the Chinese government and the Chinese grain buyers because here are these people that delivered what they said they'd deliver, and we paid for it. The end of that story is that after that sale had been completed, Mr. Ting came to Winnipeg with an interpreter. He spoke fluent English, but he came into my office to see me and he was speaking through the interpreter. I kept asking him why'd they'd bought it and how they'd decided to buy wheat. Finally, he stood up, and I thought he was annoyed. He'd told the interpreter to go with him, and he marched him back to our switchboard area, and told him to sit there and stay there. He walked back in the office and shut the door. "Now," he said, "Mr. Richardson, I can answer your questions much better without that fellow."

NP: Ah. More than an interpreter then?

GR: Yes, he was keeping an eye on Mr. Ting. And I said, "Well, why did you decide to buy Canadian wheat?" Well, he said, "I was instructed by my government to deal with the western world. I couldn't deal with the United States because they wouldn't deal with China. So," he said, "for about six weeks I get every newspaper that I could get from Canada, and I read it and I found that Canada was very worried because they had a wheat surplus. So, I said to myself, 'Ha ha! Mr. Ting, you will buy wheat from Canada.' So, as you know Mr. Richardson, I did, and it was very successful and worked very well. And perhaps," he said, "1,000, 2,000, maybe 5 or 6,000 fewer Chinese starved to death that winter because of your Canadian wheat. But Mr. Ting's wheat purchase made a headline in every newspaper in Canada. Mr. Ting has done very well for Mr. Ting. He's done very well in his party." It wasn't anything to do with need, it was a political decision.

[0:55:45]

NP: How do you actually establish those connections? How did you get an audience with Mr. Ting, or was he just as eager to meet you?

GR: No, he wasn't eager to meet me, but as I said, I had opened a securities office in Hong Kong, and we had rented space from a very influential man in Hong Kong, who's done very, very, very well for himself. So, I asked him if he could make an appointment, which he did. He arranged the appointment.

NP: Who did the—as you said you were very well briefed in the customs of the nation that you were dealing with—who did that? Did Richardson's have their sort of research people who did that or consulting firms? Just curious.

GR: I forget now who I--.

NP: Or it's just wise business to know your customer?

GR: Well, just find out what the Chinese customs are. It may have been the man that I'm speaking about who said, "You don't talk business--." I think probably that's who it was.

NP: If you just withhold a little information from somebody you don't like you can let them sort of sink into a bad situation? I'd asked you about the ingredients of a successful grain company, and I did mean Canadian in a sense because Canada, in my mind—and again looking at the industry and its, I think, amazing success—Canada is a very small nation with a very big geographical footprint, and yet it's done amazingly well in an international grain market.

GR: Right.

NP: So, and this maybe leads into the other questions about the interconnectedness of a company like Richardson's with, well, let's start with Canadian Grain Commission [CGC]. What would you say about the interconnectedness, the advantages, disadvantages, of--?

GR: Well, Canadian grain has quality, and it's consistent. The Grain Commission, when it's graded, it's graded with great accuracy, and a buyer in Europe knows that if he's buying 2 Northern, he knows what he's getting, what it's going to weigh, what the analysis is going to be, and he knows everything about it. It's the quality and consistency about it which isn't duplicated in many other countries.

NP: You say many others, or are there some that are sort of gaining ground on Canada in that regard?

GR: Not that I know of.

NP: Australia perhaps?

GR: Perhaps only, I would think. They have severe droughts there at times, so they can't always produce high quality. If it's a drought year, it's a shrunken kernel and not the same quality to make bread. But Canada is big enough—western Canada particularly—that there's always some. We have droughts in this country in areas, but if we have a drought one summer, we have a carry-over.

NP: Which makes me think, I guess since the Great Depression when probably that was the widest-spread bad weather conditions in Canada, did your dad or mom ever speak of what it was like in the business in those years in the '30s?

GR: Yes.

NP: What--?

GR: Well, it was difficult.

[1:00:01]

NP: How did that impact on the company? We hear how it impacts the farmers, and that's pretty direct.

GR: Well, the fertilizer sales were not--. Well, there wasn't that much fertilizer used way back then, but the fertilizer sales wasn't the same volume. You just had to be very cautious.

NP: And I guess exports were--. Well, first of all, production would be down?

GR: Oh, yes.

NP: So, that would be a--.

GR: And the quality wouldn't--. For one or two years there would be some carry-over, but then it would be shipped out and be down to the current year's production. The quality would not be the same, so it would sell at a discount.

NP: And worldwide demand, I mean, that would have been another factor?

GR: Gosh, I can't--.

NP: Because the Depression had a pretty wide impact.

GR: Yes, but people have to eat, fortunately.

NP: Do you have a special connection to grain, do you think, as a product? Or is it a—?

GR: Well, in our own company we were very diversified because we were in the grain business—always and still is our basic business—and then in the securities business, and in the transportation business, and the pipeline construction business. We made a large part of the Trans Canada Pipeline. For a while we were in the shipping business with lake freighters. In fact, we had the first ocean-going laker; a full-sized boat that would travel on the Great Lakes and when freeze-up came, she could go on the high seas instead of being tied up all winter. It would work on the high seas all winter, come back in, and work on the Great Lakes in the summer.

NP Were you in the business when the shipping was still going?

GR: Yes.

NP: So, did you travel on a grain ship?

GR: Yes.

NP: What was that like?

GR: Very interesting. Well, I'm the one that had the ocean-going laker built over in Scotland.

NP: How did that come about?

GR: Well, I was president of the company at the time and decided that it was foolish to have a boat that cost a good deal of money and could earn money tied up all winter, so why couldn't we have an ocean-going laker? Talked to people in the shipping business,

and they said they could build one. You're getting me off on sidelines, but I decided to go to Scotland to see how this ship was coming along because it was supposed to be delivered to us here in September. I get over there and it wasn't doing very well. As you know, a grain boat has holds and then beneath the holds is a place for the water that runs underneath, so the ballast can be put in there and other things. So, I said, "We do a lot of welding at home, I'd like to have a hardhat and a light. I'm going down to inspect the welds." Well, they said, "That's not necessary." I said, "It may not be necessary, but I'm going to do it." So, I went down the ship on the drydock and I crawled through to the stern of the ship marking welds with a piece of yellow chalk because there were some that wouldn't pass mustard. I kept a list of them, where they were.

NP: And how did you know they wouldn't pass mustard?

GR: Because we had welded pipeline in Canada, and I know welding.

NP: Just because you were interested in it?

GR: Well--.

NP: Like it's not every grain company owner that would know the quality of a weld.

GR: Well, when we were in the pipeline construction business, every weld was x-rayed. It had to be well done. In the pipeline business, every weld is x-rayed, and if there's any faults in it, it shows up on the x-ray, and it has to be done over again. The bad weld has to be cut out, the pipe has to be pushed together and re-welded. So, yes, I've seen a lot of welding and done some of it, so I could tell if the welds weren't good.

[1:05:31]

So, I said to the company management, "I'd like to talk about the delivery of the ship. It was supposed to be the end of September and now you're telling me it's going to be January." I said, "January is no use to us. The lake's frozen and we want delivery in September." Well, the union were doing it da-da-da. I said, "Let's meet with the union." "Well, we don't do that." I said, "I'd like to meet with the union after lunch." So, they met, and the union sat on one side of the table pretty frosty to begin with. Management sat on the other side and we discussed the--. I said, "I happen to know that this is the last ship that you have to build this year. So, you fellows that are taking your holidays in the summer, if you would like to help a Canadian, you'd take your holidays after you've finished this ship. Number one, you'd fix all the welds that I've marked underneath so we don't have to redo them too soon." The head of the union pulled out some cigarette makings and papers. "Oh, gosh!" I said, "I'd love to have a cigarette, can

you loan me one?" So, he gave me the cigarettes, the package, and I shook out the tobacco and rolled the cigarette and lit it. That did it.

NP: Broke the ice?

GR: Broke the ice. He said, "What do you say boys? Let's give the Canadian his ship on the 30th of September." And they said, "We will." And they did.

NP: Wow. And the welds were fixed?

GR: And the welds were fixed, and everything was--. The management of the company said, "That's never happened before." And I said, "Because you tried to tell them what to do, you didn't ask them to help. It's the right approach. If you ask them to help, they'll help. If you tell them what to do, they'll tell you where to go." [Laughing]

NP: And I think that the fact that you knew the difference between a good weld and a bad weld also impressed them.

GR: Well, the fact that I had met with them and had crawled the ship.

NP: Well, that too, sure. So, that ship then was delivered in September. Where did you take delivery of it?

GR: In Montreal--.

NP: Montreal?

GR: In Sorel, I think, because that was our terminal in this country, in Sorel, Quebec. It was delivered there.

NP: And what was its first payload?

GR: Oh, I can't remember. We got some Canadian grain on it, and it went somewhere, and then it sailed the high seas all winter and came back in. We had it for quite a few years, and it worked very well. And the other thing—oh I'm off the grain trade and onto--.

NP: Ships are part of the grain trade!

GR: Well, we developed the first bow thruster.

NP: Okay, what's that?

GR: Well, it's the propellor that's on the horizontal at the bow of the ship. There's a whole thing that will pull back, a piece of metal that will pull back, on each side. So, the propellor's in water, but the water can shoot out one side or you can close that and shoot it out the other side. So, you don't need a tugboat.

NP: Ah, so more maneuverable.

GR: We thought it was a good idea and we put it on our vessels, and it worked very well. So, we could go down the Great Lakes faster and cheaper than anybody else.

NP: And where did that idea come from?

GR: Well, it made sense because all you've got to do--. It's water against the ship or a tug and a crew of men. The water works, so. I forget where the idea came from, but somebody had the idea and we'd thought we'd try it, and it worked.

[1:10:18]

NP: Good.

GR: So, I imagine most of the Great Lakes boats have it now. We don't have any, so I don't know.

NP: A decision was made at some point to divest the company of the ships?

GR: Yes. It wasn't a particularly happy decision, but somebody wanted to buy them and wanted to pay more than they were worth. So, they bought them.

NP: Who'd you sell to?

GR: Oh, gosh. It was a foreign company. I'm sorry, I've forgotten.

NP: Was that long ago that --?

GR: Quite a while ago.

NP: Quite a while ago? There's been a big change in the shipping. Canadian-owned shipping companies are few and far between these days. I, too, got off track a bit, but before we go any further, we've been an hour into the interview and are you comfortable?

GR: Yes.

NP: Okay, I just didn't want you to sit longer than you're comfortable.

GR: No, I'm fine.

NP: Okay, good. We started talking about the connection between the private company and the CGC as one of the special features of the Canadian grain trade. Canadian Wheat Board [CWB], how's that connection and its contribution or non-contribution to the success of the Canadian grain trade?

GR: Well, the CWB is not that helpful. They say that some grains, everything must be handled through the CWB. Well, they don't do anything to make it any better. Malting barley and things, you used to be able to select malting barley and then the Wheat Board said all malting barley had to be handled through the Wheat Board. Well, it didn't help selecting it, and it didn't make it available to the American customers when they wanted it particularly. It's been quite a while since I've been in the trade, so.

NP: Yeah, and a lot has changed.

GR: Yes.

NP: But the advantages of having a Wheat Board as opposed to having a CGC, from what you're saying, it's just not the same thing.

GR: No, the Grain Commission, the grading is essential. It's well done, has to be done without any bias one way or another—just consistently done by inspectors. They're very well trained and very good.

NP: A good, honest operation?

GR: Yes.

NP: Yeah, I'm sure that's not the case either everywhere around the world.

GR: No, no.

NP: Connection between the grain companies and the railways?

GR: Well, the railways are interested in cash and in volume, and they have given some incentive to the grain companies to do the right thing, to put in a unit train track, to put in a spur track. Of course, the old boxcar is gone, and the hopper cars came in.

NP: Were you active in the grain company at the time that they brought in the hopper car program and so on?

GR: Yes, yes.

NP: That make a big difference?

GR: Yes. Yeah, it made a big difference, a difference in unloading. Sometimes it was difficult to get the opening on the hopper car so that it would open, and then you were in big trouble.

NP: Oh, yes. [Laughing] I would think so because they've got that big screwdriver to—what I refer to as a big screwdriver, the machine that opens it—and so I guess they would sort of--.

GR: Well, they'd get bent or seize or something and they wouldn't open at all. Then you had a problem because they would hold up the unloading system in the elevator because you're used to moving cars right through.

[1:15:22]

NP: The connection between the Richardsons and grain research?

GR: Well, we've been interested in encouraging research in grain, and there's been some wonderful research done here in Manitoba. Triticale, are you familiar with--?

NP: Refresh my memory. I've heard of the--.

GR: It was a cross between, I think—it's going back a long time—durum wheat and rye. It had some wonderful properties, but this basic seed had to be kept pure. My eldest son was involved in triticale and was encouraging the development of it and the export of it, and it was well-received abroad. But, as I repeat this, you had to use the right seed. If you didn't use the right seed, you could still call it triticale, but it didn't have the same properties. I hate to say it, but the Americans got the triticale—they could buy it and take it to the States—and they didn't pay the same attention to the basic seed. They started selling it abroad, and they were destroying the export market.

NP: Do you recall what the advantage was of triticale?

GR: It had certain properties in it that weren't available in--. I imagine the quality of the flour that it made.

NP: Oh, so a milling advantage?

GR: Yes. It was going to be very popular if it was kept pure, and so it seemed to be going like great guns. Again, my son came to me, and he said, "Dad, somebody wants to buy our triticale business, and I think we should let it go before it's destroyed." Well, it was gone in about three years. We sold, and it was gone in about three years because the seed was not maintained.

NP: The reputation wasn't there. And reputation, as you mentioned with the quality of Canadian grain, it has a reputation that was maintained.

GR: Right, right.

NP: Competitors, Richardsons versus competitors. Any comments on the cooperation, the friendly or less so competition?

GR: No, it's a very competitive business. The Pools used to be very effective, and they were paying a patronage dividend to their customers. It seemed to make a great deal of sense. So, very simple, we started paying a patronage dividend, paying a little bit more than the Pool because we felt we were more competent, and we were able to prove the point. Our customers were very happy. We didn't lose any customers. We got customers because we paid it in cash. So, there's a way to do most things if you use your imagination. We were the first private company to pay patronage dividends. The Pools had been doing it for a long time.

[1:20:00]

NP: Friendly competition, would you say, between the family grain firms? Not that there's many of them—there's Patersons, Parrish & Heimbecker, and Richardsons, I guess, for--.

GR: Yes. Yes, there was friendly competition and support one for the other. Competition but support. If you were short something, you had made a sale and needed it desperately, they'd probably sell it to you to help you out because knowing that you'd help them out if the shoe was on the other foot.

NP: When companies like Cargill got into the market, did that have much of an impact on the competitive mix?

GR: Yes, because they were big and international and very competitive. They still are.

NP: But there's room for the smaller, quicker on the feet operations?

GR: Yes, there is, but they have to be a certain size these days. You have to be a certain volume. I think if you don't have enough elevators, or you may be in a drought area, maybe a crop failure in a certain area either from drought or too much moisture, so you have to be spread out. You don't have to be [inaudible] size, but you have to be big enough to be worthwhile.

NP: And thus, that's what's happening even with the family companies for the most part, diversification of some sort or mergers and acquisitions.

GR: Well, they've pretty well all gone.

NP: Yes, and I would think when you started there was quite a much bigger mix of grain companies.

GR: Oh, yes. I forget how many there were, but there were lot, lot more.

NP: What was life like then?

GR: It's always been interesting. It was more competitive, yes, and it was sad to see them go.

NP: And, from my understanding, there were quite a few characters involved in the--.

GR: Yes.

NP: Any ones that jump to mind for you?

GR: Well, I think it would be better to leave names out of it. [Laughing] Yes, there were quite a few.

NP: Yeah. So, much more of a--. Well, I think, even before your time it was even a bigger mix of companies.

GR: Yes. Well, my time, there was still lots of them.

NP: The Searles and the Federal Grain.

GR: Yes.

NP: McCabe's.

GR: Yes.

NP: Names that I see still on the elevators in Thunder Bay.

GR: Yes, but they're not operating companies.

NP: No, no, and a lot of those elevators are disappearing. So, because we have a special interest in the Thunder Bay area in this project, just some comments on changes that you've seen in the Thunder Bay grain industry over your career.

GR: Well, the smaller elevators, terminals, seem to cease to exist because they weren't big enough to handle the volume. It's been sad to see them go. What if I jumped to Vancouver and not Thunder Bay? We wound up holding an elevator on the north shore that I was never very happy with because it wasn't very big. It didn't have very good dust control, and it finally caught fire and burned down. Nobody was injured, so that was--.

NP: A good thing.

GR: A good thing.

NP: What was the name of that elevator do you remember? Was it in Vancouver or--?

[1:25:01]

GR: Yes, it was on the north shore. It wasn't Burrard Terminal, but it was--. Escapes me right now. I'll get it in a while. Then we wondered whether we'd rebuild or not. This sounds very boastful, but it's not meant to be. We had some people analyze the situation, and no, it wouldn't make any sense to because Prince Rupert was there. There were elevators. It was adequate. So, the recommendations from the consultants was--. So, our executive committee were prepared. We weren't going to rebuild. As I did more than once, I'm afraid, I said, "Well, I'm sorry, we're not taking the advice of the consultants. We're going to rebuild because Canadian grain has to move out of both coasts. It's going to move out of Vancouver, so we're going to build a new, modern elevator." And we have, and it's been very, very successful.

NP: And is it called a Pioneer Elevator, or does it have a different name?

GR: No, it's Richardson. It handles a large volume of canola and it's won several awards for the size of ship, and the speed it can load, and the dust control system.

NP: Nice to start from scratch?

GR: Well, yes. One of the things was we studied—or I travelled down the West Coast of the United States and studied what they had in their elevators. It wasn't patented, it could be copied, and it was copied. In Vancouver, to load a vessel, as you know, they have to load them evenly. So, they had a whole crew that moved the vessel because the spouts were fixed on the side of the elevator. The spouts didn't move so the vessel had to move. So, the simple thing to change that was to have the spouts moved, and the vessel could come in and tie, and then you could keep pouring the grain aboard by simply moving a spout, not take time to move the vessel. So, we built all that into our elevator. We can get dispatched and load a vessel very quickly.

NP: When was that elevator brought online?

GR: Oh. I would guess in the '70s. And again, I'm digressing about Vancouver, but it's on National Harbour's Board land. We don't own the land that the elevator is on, and we built the elevator it was concrete—you know, straight concrete. I tried to get permission to paint it. "Nope, you can't. National Harbours Board said you couldn't." So, I shouldn't tell you this story, but we waited and

waited and waited, and finally said, “We can paint a piece of one of the tanks 3 by 4 and see the reaction.” I said, “3 by 4? You can’t even see it, the other side of Burrard Inlet.” So, I did what I shouldn’t have done, but I got a hold of our paint crew and I said, “The National Harbour’s Board take a long weekend in July. So, we’re going to have the full paint crew and all the paint we need to paint the elevator in Vancouver on Thursday night. We’re going to start painting Friday morning because they won’t be in the office. They won’t pay attention. We’re going to paint Friday, Saturday, Sunday, overtime if we have to, and Monday, so the elevator’s finished by Tuesday.”

So, I was doing exactly what I’d been told not to do. I waited for the phone to ring on Tuesday, and about 12 o’clock in the morning the phone rang. “Mr. Richardson, the painting of your elevator has been approved.” [Laughing] I said, “Thank you very much. What happened?” “We got 302 phone calls saying, ‘Wonderful! Appreciate the appearance!’ We only had two complaints. So, 302 to 2, you won. Well done.”

[1:30:53]

NP: Good! So, they’ve changed the colour of the elevators now though?

GR: Yes, but this is when it was first painted orange. We only painted one side facing the Inlet because we didn’t want to disturb the people, the residents on the West Side that were looking at the elevator.

NP: Where it sort of faded into the background with less--.

GR: I shouldn’t have told that story, but--.

NP: Why not?

GR: Well, I shouldn’t have done it.

NP: Well, you didn’t even have to beg forgiveness. Isn’t what they say, “Better to beg forgiveness than--.” What is that expression?

GR: Well, I told them if it was serious, we’d repaint it.

NP: And customer reaction was great. Well, not just customer, viewer reaction was positive.

GR: Positive, yeah. And a ship coming in, they'd say, "Where do you want us to load?" "Well, the elevator painted orange on the north shore."

NP: Now, in Thunder Bay then—because I can recall when that was painted—what was the reaction there? Anything?

GR: Yes. It was all good. Some of the neighbouring elevators thought we were crazy, but.

NP: Well, it's an expensive proposition to paint an elevator, correct?

GR: No, it protects the concrete.

NP: Oh, it has to be done anyway?

GR: It should be done, but then you have to repair the annex if you don't. So, it's just as easy to paint it as it is to repair the concrete.

NP: Easier, yeah. So, you did say how frequently they have to be or should be repainted for the--?

GR: Well, the old wooden elevators, where I started, used to be painted every four or five years. The concrete lasts much longer. The next generation of the firm changed the colour from orange to blue now.

NP: Blue, yes. I think you've answered a lot of this question, but there might be some you want to expand upon. Major changes that you've seen in the industry over the years related to markets and products?

GR: Well, fewer buyers and same products basically.

NP: Fewer but equal volume? Or just fewer altogether because there's more competition?

GR: Well, you have to get the volume somewhere. You sell it in some other different part of the world. You send it to India, China, or someplace.

NP: So, fewer buyers because they're developing their own industries?

GR: Yes, I think that's--. I'm really not up to speed on the statistics, but they may be eating more of the things other than bread, because the Canadian grain industry is basically--. Basically, it's canola now too.

NP: Canola has taken quite a bit of the farmers' crop space.

GR: Yes, because it's--. Well, that's another story. Canola used to be called rapeseed. We were making a little bit of oil, and it wasn't selling very well in Canada. So, I said, "We've got to have people go into stores in the east and west and see why people are buying olive oil and soybean oil and not buying rapeseed oil." So, we hired a firm to have people go be in the store while it was--. And they'd see people come in and buy, as I said, olive oil or soybean oil. "Here's rapeseed oil. It's cheaper, why wouldn't you buy it?" "I won't have anything to do with rape," the lady would say. So, I said, "There's only one thing we can do. Same product but we change the name." So, changed it to canola and it took off.

[1:35:51]

NP: Now, when you changed the name, how do you go about changing the name of a--?

GR: Just change the label on the can.

NP: That's it?

GR: Well, no. [Laughing]

NP: But farmers started growing canola as opposed to rapeseed. It's the same thing, so did you have to have an official name change?

GR: I can't recall how it all happened, but the group involved in growing rapeseed—it didn't mean it was me alone—it was a rapeseed association decided that they'd change the name.

NP: Now the Canola Council?

GR: Yes.

NP: It's got a nicer ring to it. I wonder how they came up with the name.

GR: Well, it made sense, didn't it? Canadian oil.

NP: Of course! Hm! Ways of doing business, changes over the span of your career. Any major changes in ways of doing business?

GR: No, you have to have service and quality and the buyer's interest at heart. At one stage, when the Wheat Board were interested in selling to the UK and it was a very competitive business, we decided that the only thing to do was to have sufficient volume. So, we just decided that we would sell it for next to nothing, and after a little while, we were selling a very high percentage of it. Then, by that time, we'd established a relationship with all the customers, and they allowed us to increase the price a little bit and it became very satisfactory.

NP: The other question I have here we really have dealt with, and I don't know if there's anything you wanted to add is the major changes you've seen in terminal grain elevator size, technology, and location. So, I think we've--. Unless there's anything to add.

GR: I think we've pretty well covered that. The small ones, unfortunately, have to--.

NP: And that's what the demise of the Kam River set of elevators was, not just the size of the elevator, but also the size of the ships. At the same time the ships were growing and that's not a huge river. The cost of dredging it was--.

GR: Right. Not worth it.

NP: What major challenges did Richardson's face over the time period that you were involved?

GR: In the grain business? Well, the three Pools—Manitoba Pool, Saskatchewan Pool, and the Alberta Pool—were all very active and very competitive and very well supported by their clients, so you had to prove that you'd give better service and better satisfaction.

NP: Not a bad thing for a company. Keeps you on your toes, right?

GR: That's right.

NP: I'm wondering now—and maybe, you know, as you said, you've been out of the business for a while, but I'm sure you keep you ear to the ground—with the demise of the Pools, the amalgamations and then, I think, the complete demise of the system, what impact did that have on Richardson's?

GR: An opportunity to expand. Well, one of the things that I shouldn't mention, but one of the big assets in my experience in western Canadian grain trade was the fact that I fly a private helicopter. It's right over here. I still have my license and I can still fly.

[1:40:15]

NP: I'll resist the temptation to ask for a ride. [Laughing] Anyway, yeah, I'm interested in how this is going to play out.

GR: Well, the head office was in Winnipeg, and this is where I was based, but if you wanted to visit the country elevator—and that's the only way you know what the situation is, to go and visit the site, talk to the manager, and see what his problem is, and give him an answer. You want to change something, you want to do something, you want to see what the competitors are doing? You have to be there and see it. I was based in Winnipeg, I would fly to Regina, and I'd have to get a car and I'd drive, I might make—well, depending on what elevator there was a problem at—I might make three or four a day, and then I'd have to drive back to Regina and get the plane back to Winnipeg. Well, the helicopter beat all that. I could fly from Winnipeg to Regina in not much more time than--. Then I could go out to the elevator and land in the driveway. They knew I was coming, of course, and I got so I could visit 10 or 11 a day and be right there and you don't need a road. Some of the elevators you've got to go round and about to go from one to the other, there were no direct roads. But with a helicopter, you can go direct.

NP: As the crow flies.

GR: As the crow flies. And you see what the situation is, and give the man his answer while you're there, not disturb anybody, and take off and go to another one. So, that was a very big help.

NP: I'm checking my time here because we're getting close to the end of the space on the recorder, but.

GR: That tells you what I usually do, I'm talking too much.

NP: No, if you didn't talk this wouldn't be a good interview! I guess, I hear a lot about the--. Like one of the big changes in the whole grain industry is the shutting down of the track lines, the branch lines, the individual community elevators. I can see,

economically, from a business perspective that that could be a very good thing. Was there any negative impact of that, the community aspect of the old system?

GR: Yes, I think so. It made the situation difficult for a lot of farmers that had to haul their grain further to an elevator. I think the time was when the man might be on the combine and the wife might be driving the truck, and she would take the smaller truck that she could manage in then dump the grain and go back out to--. That day's over. It's big equipment, big fields.

NP: So, as we get big business on the company side, you're getting big farms on the farmer side. So, they're--.

GR: Well, yes. And the availability of the bigger equipment is more efficient.

NP: Are you optimistic about Canada's future in the grain industry?

GR: Yes. We're expanding in it all the time, doing what we can.

NP: So, the sort of the short-term pain that occurs, I think, in—almost any change to somebody is painful—but--.

GR: Well, you have to adjust. And I have to jump back to the helicopter and say, "That sounds like a very expensive--." But actually, by flying it myself and owning it myself—the company didn't own it, I owned it—it's not really very much more expensive that driving a car because you don't pay a pilot, and you burn jet fuel, and you keep it on the farm like farm fuel. You don't get it at the airport where there's all sorts of taxes on it. So, the fuel I was burning was costing about 50 percent of what it would cost at the airport.

[1:45:32]

NP: Plus, you avoid the congestion of the whole air traffic, and your time is worth money. Now, I want to get a couple questions in that are more general. This is a very general question. Do you have any memorabilia including pictures that you feel would be important in publicly commemorating the history of the grain trade and your company's part in it? Especially as it relates to Thunder Bay.

GR: Oh, I imagine in our archives, which are downtown, there might be, but I don't have any personally, no.

NP: Okay. So, you have an archivist on staff, do you that is really familiar with the--?

GR: Yes, yes.

NP: Oh, good. Good. Then I'll have a chat with that person. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you that I haven't asked you?

GR: No. I know I've told you things I shouldn't have, but.

NP: Well, you see, that's why I say don't sign the part about--. You can say, "To be kept under lock and key for the next 100 years." You haven't said anything you need to worry about, if I'm any judge. Are there others you think we should interview, particularly from Richardson's operation, that would be valuable to add to our project?

GR: Gosh, the old timers are you interested in?

NP: Yep. Well, we'll eventually work our way back, but we're trying to get the old timers while they're still with us.

GR: Well, I was going to say, the people that were so helpful to me that somewhat taught me the business are no longer with us, unfortunately. In fact, I can digress a little bit and say that the man that used to be my father's secretary, Mr. William McGillivray Rait—R-A-I-T—and he--. A little story that's a true story here. As I say, he was my father's secretary, and he was very good at shorthand and typing. My father was dissatisfied with the man that had been the head of the Pioneer, and he said, "Mr. Rait would you take a letter while I give this gentleman his severance agreement?" So, he did. After Mr. Rait had taken down that letter, my father said, "Now, Rait, how would you like to succeed him and be president of the Pioneer?" "Oh!" He said, "That would be wonderful. When would that happen?" "As soon as you take another letter appointing yourself president." And so.

NP: One of these people, sort of like your mother, who absorbed the business without having to be in that official position of--.

GR: So, when I came along, he kind of took me under his wing. He ran the Pioneer and all the grain end of the business for many years, and he would be a great man to talk to, but he's no longer with us.

NP: I know, I do wish I had a telephone back to those days because there are many—some of whom just recently have passed away—who I thought, "Oh, jeez." Well, think about it, in case there are some that you--.

GR: I'm digressing again on Mr. Rait. I was in the office on the 10th floor of the Grain Exchange building there—as it used to be called—and he came in a few days after I was there and said, "George, George." He was Scotch. "I'm going to be retiring from this firm someday, and I want to come back and visit. And I want to have one office where I can come in and get a good cigar. Now, I know you're not well-educated on cigars, so I'm making it my business to educate you. Here's your initial group." And he handed over about 10 or 12 cigars. "Now," he said, "until I get you educated, you're getting one out of every box I buy. I want to be able to come in here when I retire and get a good cigar." [Laughs]

NP: Well, I think we've come to the end of our time, and, if I recall correctly, I have an hour and 51 minutes, and we're at an hour and 50 minutes and 30 seconds. So, I'm going to say an official goodbye on the tape. It's hard to believe that two hours have gone by. I'm so glad I've been able to catch you between your flights and your trips south and have your--.

GR: Well, thank you so very much. I hope we said some things that would be of some interest, but I know I've digressed quite a bit, so.

End of interview.