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Company Affiliations: Canadian National Railway (CNR)

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Summary: Retired engineer for the Canadian National Railway Ray Rogowski discusses his career on the railroad, which brought him in contact with the Canadian grain trade. He begins by describing his early work on a farm in the Prairies, his family's history of homesteading in Manitoba, and his first temporary jobs on the railway as a fireman on a route that picked up grain from country elevators. He recalls many of the changes to the railway during his career, including the increasing size of trains and railcars, good and bad crop years, the change from steam to diesel engines, the downsizing of rail subdivisions, and the downsizing of the five-man crew to two men, but also technological and mechanical advancements that improved the quality and safety of the job. Rogowski recalls the heydays of grain in the Lakehead and the downturn as more grain moved west. Other topics discussed include his occasional work at the Thunder Bay hump yard, his interactions with the union, his interactions with the grain terminals, community members sweeping leftover grain from boxcars, winter movement of grain to the east, and the railway's part in building Canada as a nation.

Keywords: Canadian National Railway; Railway engineer; Railway fireman; Steam locomotives; Diesel locomotives; Grain transportation—rail; Grain farmers/producers; Farm supplies and equipment; Prairie Provinces—History; Railway terminals; Railway subdivisions; Railway branch lines; Boxcars; Hopper cars; Tank cars; Country grain elevators; Railway rolling stock; Conductor; Railway brakeman; Cabooses; Hump yard; Hump riders; Switchmen; Hand signals; Labour unions; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Automation; Train inspection; Train maintenance; Steam engines; Diesel engines; Health and safety; Downsizing

Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: Are we ready to go? Good. Today's interview is with Ray Rogowski at his dining room table at 754 Ernestine Avenue. Today we'll be spending a lot of time talking about the railway industry and its part in the grain trade. So Ray, in preparation for this interview, we talked a little bit about your way-back history, and if you'd like to talk a bit about your life in Saskatchewan—when you were born, what it was like on the farm—anything you'd like to say.

RR: As a teenager, my friend and I—Arlo Handshaw, I grew up with him—we worked on the farm part time during the summer, threshing season, haying season. I found out in those years the difference between grain and barley and whatever. It was the days of the threshing years, and this was before the combines, so it was all manual labour. I worked for a farmer, a fellow by the name of Ed Selland. He was still working with horses in the late '40s. Other people had tractors or whatever, but this particular farmer--. And through Arlo's family, this is how we got to know these people on different farms. So like I say, during the summer we went out, and we had a job mostly in the field with the grain stooking, binding. Then as we worked out there, we worked with bees—they had hives of bees—and doing the milk, separating or whatever. And later on, I worked for Swift's. It's a meat and poultry company where they processed turkeys, chickens, whatever, so that was part of the farm out there. Then in '50--. Well, I come to Lakehead in '51. My father knew the foreman that worked at the repair track, so when I come down to visit my sister, I approached him on the railroad, and that's when I hired out in April that year.

NP: With--?

RR: I worked for, well, a year and a half to June '53, and then I went firing. Then through the years after firing, then I qualified as an engineer. But working here and then going back out west because the work here was seasonal--. The elevators usually shut down in November-December, so I went back out west, years through the '50s. I worked for the express department in '54 for about a year because I couldn't hold a job firing, and then through time I worked different terminals. I worked--. Well, it would say on here. I worked at Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Melville, Saskatoon, Biggar, North Battleford over a period of time. Some of it wasn't by choice because if I wasn't working as a fireman and Winnipeg needed firemen during the winter months—especially Christmas and New Years season—I was just told to go there and work. You get a phone call, so you'd have to go there. The working conditions were pretty good because we had passenger service. There were a lot of passenger trains. We had a pass. If not our own pass, we would get a work pass, or in those days we could use a union card. The union had cars that qualified you to ride on these trains to get around. And it was interesting, the different places you work with different people, really, different staff and whatever. Like I say, through those years, and then when I come back here in '60, I stayed there permanent. We had our conditions on the railroad where I could take a temporary clearance or a permanent clearance. So I was usually on a temporary clearance. I always had to come back to my home terminal.

[0:05:23]

NP: What is a clearance?

RR: It's my worksheet. It's like a--.

NP: Schedule?

RR: Itinerary of your job, eh? What you qualified as, and it has all your medical history on there and your mechanical qualifications and rules because this was an ongoing thing. We were always into new rules or mechanical. We had to do mechanical on some steam engines, but it was mostly on diesel that we had to qualify for. In that respect, like I said, I did go back a couple of times just on a temporary clearance to work out west, but usually I was here from ’60 on.

NP: So when you talk about a temporary clearance, would that be something like a temporary position rather than a permanent--?

RR: No, no. This is just my papers. I’m going to go to work in a terminal, so when they look at it when I get a recall, they have to release me to come back to my home terminal. Like I said, everything was on there, so when I got called back, this was the reason why because I was on a temporary. But if I wanted to go to Winnipeg to work permanently, then I took a permanent clearance. In that respect, when I could hold a job there, I just couldn’t go there on my own because there was certain times of the year when we had a timecard change, and I could go on that date and exercise my seniority because our seniority run from Thunder Bay, all of Manitoba, and all of Saskatchewan. That was our territory. Then there was a mountain district and the eastern district.

NP: So just to clarify some terms—both for me and for people who will be listening to this—when you talk about the region that you work in so that you had your position in a certain region and you’d have seniority within, if you moved to another region then you didn’t just automatically slot in at your seniority level? You went to the bottom?

RR: No, you would have to start as a new man. In the old days, I could have transferred to the mountain region in the ‘50s, but I would have had to start as a new seniority date, really. This is what it would amount to. We had people come here from districts, you know, but in the official line, they went from district to district on the company’s doing, so.

NP: So when you came back here in the early ‘60s--.

RR: ’60, yeah.

NP: Yeah. Was that as an engineer?

RR: Yeah. No, I was still firing at the time. I didn’t qualify for an engineer until 1969 because what had happened there was the last engineers were hired in ’55, and actually, when the diesels come out in ’53 and ’54, there was an abundance of firemen. So they let us work on the engine as a lookout or whatever because the years before that we were either shoveling coal or running stokers. But

then it took about eight years for everybody to fill back in again. So yeah, I qualified in ’69. This is through rules and mechanical. You had to do both at that time. So they would have a car come down, a private car on like a big coach, with the instructors in it. You did your exams and whatever. In the old days for steam engines, you’d have to get somebody out of the shop—a machinist or whatever—and he would take you into the roundhouse and show you what you had to learn about, different gears and valves or whatever on these steam engines. It was more or less particular to breakdowns. If you’re on the road, if this went haywire or this broke, you had the knowledge. This is where the engineer come from, really.

NP: I’m going to leave this for now, but we’ll certainly come back and go far more into detail about how to get to be an engineer, the training you needed, the kinds of work that you do, but I don’t want to lose sight of the early days and your experiences there.

[0:10:10]

RR: Yeah.

NP: Okay. So let’s--. But even before that, I’d also like to clarify something that you said. You said that you would report to a terminal. I’m assuming that’s a railway terminal as opposed to a grain elevator terminal?

RR: Oh, it was all railway.

NP: Okay. Because we, of course, talk about terminal elevators.

RR: That’s true. Okay, railway. Like I said, I could go into the jobs. Like when we described our jobs, I have some on paper here that this is where we were designated to go when we come to work. Like they say, “Well, you’re working Pool 7 tonight, or you’re going to be working Pool 6.” These were the jobs that were designated.

NP: Okay. Again, I’ll come back to this, but I’m going to go back to the farm right now.

RR: Okay.

NP: And I’m hoping we can make copies of this as well?

RR: Oh, yeah. Very good.

NP: And then what I'd like to do is spend some time with you so you can explain the different sheets to me.

RR: Yeah, yeah. Good.

NP: But we don't necessarily have to do that on tape.

RR: No, that's good.

NP: So let's go back to the farm. So I think in talking to you before, your dad, his career was on the railway.

RR: A section man. Yeah. He was a section man.

NP: So your family didn't have a farm?

RR: No. He come off the farm. Meleb. Do you know where Meleb is?

NP: I have no idea. How's Meleb spelled?

RR: M-E-L-E-B.

NP: Okay.

RR: Manitoba. The other side of Fraserwood.

NP: Was that a family farm?

RR: Yeah, that was the original. My parents come over in the early 1900s. My mother was born in '87, and my dad was born in '89, 1800s.

NP: And where did they come from?

RR: So they come from the Ukraine to Meleb, and the family was there that there was--. Oh, I guess there was seven uncles and two aunties, and they ventured out. There's still some living at Teulon and family in Winnipeg. I've been there three different times in

the past couple of years and look at the old homestead. They have a little park set up on the highway just outside of Gimli, well, Fraserwood, whatever. The old homestead, eh? They had a school, a miniature school, and an outside bake oven from the old days. Then they had a cairn with grass plates on it and all the families that lived there during, well, 18--. I can say they moved in there about 1895. I used to go up there in the '40s, visit my grandmother or whatever. CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] train went up there, and I remember the conductor or the trainman coming and lighting the gas lamps in the coaches. That's how old in those days. We travelled, visit, and then there were funerals and weddings or whatever, but that was the old homestead. Then through time, my uncles, like my Uncle Harry, he worked on the railroad at Moosejaw after he left the farm. Some of the family worked for Department of Highways, and then others ventured off to Borden, Saskatchewan, and Toronto. Had an uncle in Toronto. But this all come out of Meleb at the time in the early 1900s.

NP: And why did your dad leave the farm?

RR: For a job. Did you ever see that country up in the Interlake? Wow! I couldn't believe that people lived there and how they lived. Well, they had a cow and little shed or whatever, milk shed. They had some grain, but I think in the old days, they lived mostly on firewood. They used to load firewood and take it into Winnipeg because even in Saskatchewan we had to buy firewood by the cord or whatever. But in that area, it was debatable, but then they were the last of the settlers because the good farms, say, in Portage, Brandon, wherever you went west, that was taken up in the 1800s, but not as late as the 1900s. So that property was gone more or less in 1860, 1875. This is a lot of information what I got from my relations, you know, why they wound up there because the other property was taken when they immigrated over.

[0:15:15]

And they had interesting families through time. Some wound up, like I say, in different parts of Winnipeg or whatever. I know a couple of the nephews wound up as dentists. His name is Moran, he's a dentist in Winnipeg. Then through our history, like, my family or whatever, there was something lost there for years, but then through time, we got this back through the--. Well, it was mostly we were finding out history about the family or whatever--.

NP: So the connections were lost for a bit of time, and you've reestablished them.

RR: Yeah. Like I say, most of them, like I say, quite a few worked on the railway or whatever, but that was the job in those years. You know, the railway was new, there was building, and this is where you could have got a job, so.

NP: So did your dad talk to you about his early days on the railway?

RR: Oh, yeah. Jeez. Well, he travelled through Saskatchewan because he went from job to job, and then when he accumulated so much time out in the region, then he could pick a terminal where he wanted to work, so he took Melville. We moved into Melville in, oh, I guess 1929, in that area. My brothers and sisters, they were all born out at the line. I had three brothers born at Rhein, Saskatchewan. That's just out of Yorkton. Then I had my sister, she was born at Shellmouth down in the Assiniboine Valley. My sister Jean and John, they were born in Winnipeg, and then Mary, I guess, yeah. Mary, my sister Mary. Out of the family—like I had eight of them in the family—there's just my brother and myself. He's in California, and he worked on the railway, and down there he worked on the railway, so.

NP: So what kinds of work did your dad do?

RR: Section man. He repaired the track and built track. He went out on gangs, and they built south of Biggar. There was a line going over towards Hanna, Alberta, and he worked there in 1928. Because when I worked out of Biggar, we got down there, and I was talking to the foreman that was there, and he knew my dad, and this is how I knew he worked there in 1928. But that line just went into Alberta so far short of Hanna, like, 20 or 30 miles, and then that was the end of the line. So our job, we went in there and turned around and then headed back to Biggar.

NP: That must have been tough work for your dad.

RR: Well, it was. Like I said, Saskatchewan, he worked outside for 40 years, you know what I mean? The wind and--. Just different. It wasn't as cold as Portage and Main but--. [Laughing] Well, it was the job, I guess. The only thing there was literacy, eh? People couldn't read or write and come from the old country. My mother picked it up real good. She did five languages through studying and whatever. She read and wrote fluently in English, but a lot of the old timers, the old immigrants, they didn't qualify, but there was still a job. But then if there was a promotion to a foreman or whatever, paperwork, so they were usually to a section, to just the one job through their time.

NP: Speaking of your mom and the fact that she was giving birth to her babies along the way, there was a lot of moving around then?

RR: Oh. [Laughs] Well, like I said, I couldn't understand how it worked in those days, but that's the way people lived, eh, you know what I mean? And most families I knew--. Well, in general, families were big in those days for some reason. On our street, there was a family down the street. There was 14 in the family, you know? And even Shirley's family, like her parents and uncles, that was a big family. But then through the years, like I say, it's just changed that much, so.

[0:20:05]

NP: Did she ever talk about what living conditions were like for her with young kids?

RR: Oh, yeah. I think at times--. Well, being in the railroad vicinity was pretty good. You always had access to something, food or transportation or whatever. My mother used to just like to go into Winnipeg shopping. She could get on the train at 1:00 in the morning at Melville, and you get into Winnipeg at 8:00 in the morning. She usually went to eat inside the Bay, did Christmas, got back on the train at 7:00 in the evening, was back in Melville at 2:00 in the morning. So she had all day in Winnipeg. Those were the good things really that she got away from just everyday life too, eh? It was the same on the road with my dad in these different terminals. She said some were good, but their housing conditions were always pretty good. They always had a house for them more or less, so they were pretty good. But then she said, like, setting up was rough to get started, but once you got settled in then it would be okay. Then she said the winters and that, then everything depended on the railway because out west, highways would shut down, and who really did the plowing in the old days? Some were subcontracted, and if the weather was that bad, they just didn't go do it. So everything depended on the railway in those days. It was the same thing when I come here in the '50s. There was no road to Atikokan. And they finally put in the highway, but Quetico and Kashabowie and places like that all depended on the railway, so. But then, like I say, when you see it happening, the change over in what we had as a worker when you hired out, and then you look around what there is today, like I said, that's how many engine men worked in this terminal.

NP: At the Lakehead?

RR: At the Lakehead. Now, I think there's about seven of them. Yeah. I was last--. Well, in this one here, I had moved up.

NP: 177 according to this list.

RR: Yeah. Well, whatever, but--.

ID: When you say enginemen--.

RR: Pardon?

ID: Does that mean anybody?

RR: Yeah. Engine service. That was firemen and engineers.

ID: I see.

RR: In engine service. Where duplicating these men was usually you had a conductor and two trainmen, or a foreman and two switchmen when you worked the yard. When you went on the road you had a--. So there was really five on the crew. I wound up in '92 just myself and the and conductor on the train. They had buyouts, they reduced the crews, so we went to work with just a conductor-only job.

NP: Big changes.

RR: Yeah.

NP: Just like big changes on farms. So going back to your--.

RR: Oh, that was the same thing too, yeah.

NP: Going back to your early days of stooking and binding.

RR: Yeah. The families on the farm, like, the area that I worked, at that time, there would usually be about five or seven children on a farm because it was just that type of work. Then when the tractors and combines come up, I watched it go down to two people, maybe a boy and a girl in a family. Half the time, the girl went to school and disappeared, and then the boy would take over. I worked with engineers and firemen. They had their own farms, but they worked on the railroad, and they doubled. They went out because of the tractor and the combine. See, they could go out and do a field in a day and a half, two days, three days, and then go back to work. Months later, they did whatever they had to do, then in the fall, it was the same with the combine. Then through the years when the combines first come in was that they come from the States, and they custom combined. So they did Nebraska, which would be earlier because of the weather, and then they did the Dakotas, and then they moved into Saskatchewan and Manitoba and custom combined. So a farmer in those days, he had the choice. Some thresh, they wanted to save the straw or whatever, but most of them would do the custom combining. So it was just the ritual from year to year. But all through the years when I worked here in the grain industry, we never had a bad year. They always said, "Well, it's going to be bad this year," and all of a sudden, a bumper crop. Then we had the Russian wheat sale. That was a nightmare. But this year is going to show, really, how important the grain is, eh?

[0:25:43]

NP: Say a little bit more about that. The year 2010, what's going to happen this year do you think? Or might?

RR: Oh, it's going to be a bad year, but like I said--.

NP: And why is that?

RR: Well, just with the moisture they had out there. We talked to people out there and the relatives that went through here in the past couple of weeks. They just said there was places there—Swift Current and--. Well, not so much Swift Current. It was more of the Yorkton area, Saskatoon area where they really got the rain. Otherwise, like I said, when we worked, always said that the--. The guys I worked with, "What are we going to do if we ever had a bad year?" Because we had people on the job working the grain--. This Bob, he said that spring he's going to buy a truck and a camper on his overtime. That was back in the '60s, and he bought a truck and a camper that summer on his overtime. That's how much work there was. Then like I always said, people depended on this really. "Oh, we're going to have a real good Christmas. I'm going to pick up some overtime or whatever." Then I always said, "What about the bad years?" And we never really had any. Well, not up until '91 anyway. There was always good years and--.

NP: What happened in '92?

RR: Well, I retired, and I left.

NP: Ah. [Laughs]

RR: Well, then things started to shrink, you know what I mean? We lost the Graham sub, then we lost the Kinghorn sub, and that was a lot of trackage. Like the King Horn sub in the '40s, early '50s, we still had passenger trains going to Longlac or Toronto or whatever.

NP: What does the word sub mean? Sub--.

RR: It's a subdivision, like a piece of track. Like our subdivision from here to Atikokan is called the Kashabowie subdivision, and then from here to Sioux Lookout was the Graham subdivision. Then on the east end, that's a different district now. That was eastern Canada run. Even the prices were different, the working prices. That was the Kinghorn sub. The subdivision is from one station to another, one terminal to another terminal. Then Atikokan to Rainy River was the Fort Frances subdivision.

NP: So it's fair to say then there was the main track, and then there was the subdivisions that joined up to it at--?

RR: Well, yeah. Well, we were classed as a branch line. See, the mainline goes from Sioux Lookout to Armstrong, Hornepayne, Toronto, and we're a branch line, but there was enough traffic on the south line. People don't realize how much traffic there was from Winnipeg into International Falls, like, lumber wise. Just solid trains of lumber from BC through the years, and then the past five years we lost the lumber trade, but for years I was amazed too. I have a boy working at Sioux Lookout as a conductor, Gary. He's doing good there, but the trains have doubled in size. Management really changes a lot of that and the economy, I guess, fuel costs, and whatever. Then, like I said, there's only two people on the train, and they're hauling size 12,000 feet. So that's over two miles of train. That's the containers you see on the cars.

NP: Given those figures, it sounds like a lot, but when you started out, how long would those trains have been?

RR: Oh, 100-car train was a big train in our days. Well, we'd be hauling—with a steam engine—we'd be hauling 60 cars, 65 cars. Then when the diesel come out, we went more or less to siding capacity. See, we had meeting points. If I was meeting a train at Quetico and that thing held 90 cars or 4,800 feet, that's what my train would have to be. Then when we got some longer tracks, then they started putting in longer trains, and then you were more or less, well, penalized in a way because you had more waiting time. See, if I got to a certain siding, and then I had to wait for a train, where in the old days, I could have went to another siding. But they were long trains. They still do. But our coal trains were big. They were good size, and same with the potash.

[0:30:55]

NP: So you mentioned the length of the train now in I don't know if it was feet or what. How many cars is that? You said 65 for the early ones, but now how many cars would be on a train?

RR: Well, it would depend on the length of the cars.

NP: So on average?

RR: See, well, on average I would say their cars would be 60 to 70 feet. In the old days with two trailers on a car, then they were 90 feet. But in the old days, we started out with 50-foot cars. They were the old boxcar type, wooden-type cars. Then we wound up with the 50-foot and the 60-foot. They went into the steel cars, and then they were replaced by the tanks, and they were about 60 feet, I guess, the tanks. Then during the heavy part of the Russian wheat sale, the CN [Canadian National Railway] loaned cars from the Carolinas. They brought up cars. I think we had about 5 or 600 of them, but all wooden boxcars. They were built in the '30s, '35 or thereabouts, because it was all stencilled on the side of a car when they were built and then refurbished or whatever. But I was

surprised at those cars being in such good condition. This is pretty near 30 years later after they were built. So we had a lot of those cars, and then the reconditions, oh, different types of cars I never thought they'd put grain into just to satisfy the Russian wheat sale.

Then those were the years too they were short of men back in the '70s, late '70s especially. My phone would just ring steady. You know, I could come home and--. Then we started hiring out ESBs, Engine Service Brakemen. Like if a conductor wanted to go, he was qualified with rules. They took him to Gimli for about three months, put him on the simulator, and they did their mechanical rules and whatever, and then they come back to work, and they'd be maybe another three months on the job qualifying. Then after six or eight months, they'd qualify as an engineer. This was all on the company's time, eh? The unions wanted to take it over because the company run it the way they wanted to run it. But anyway, it worked out good. But what had happened there, I was a little disappointed because there was some of the—well, not kids—some of the men that went there, it really didn't please them of what they were going to have to do when they realized what they were into, and the company wouldn't let them backtrack say once you hired out or accepted that position. So we had fellows actually, they lost their jobs because they just weren't suited to that type of a job. But otherwise, like I say, it worked out good now, and I don't think there's no more regular engineers, so they're all either qualified through Gimli or whatever it was. Then we used to go to Gimli for rules.

NP: Can we just leave that for a sec because I don't want to lose--. Because there's lots of information in what you're saying, but I don't want to lose the earlier memories either.

RR: Okay. Yeah, okay.

NP: So let's go back. We last left your history when you were working on the farm, and then at some point you ended up on the railway. So how--?

[0:35:01]

RR: Okay. So in the '50s working out of Melville, I worked a job that worked into Yorkton, and we called it a loop job. We worked into Russell, Manitoba, and then back, and then up into Kenora, Saskatchewan, and then back to Yorkton. In those days, the elevators would say that they--. The conductor would come with a list, and he would need 70 cars to cover the orders for that particular day or week or whatever, but they never had the cars in those days. So he'd leave Yorkton, and we'd only have 30 cars, half of what we're supposed to. Now, you had to please all the elevator agents, you know, because one would want a 50-foot car or a 40-foot car or whatever, a certain type of car that they were going to maybe load whatever grain or barley or oats. So the conductor had to please all these people and distribute these cars evenly because there was always a set up like that where these elevators

agents would come out and say, “Where are my cars?” Well, you’d have to explain to them there just aren’t that many around. [Laughs]

Then coming into the Lakehead, they had a system where if we had a train come in now, we could spot it in the evening. If they were working that evening, we’d pick up the empties at 6:00 in the morning, take them back in the yard. They were serviced or whatever, and they were back going out west maybe, say, in 48 hours. But in those days, like I said, there weren’t that many cars, so like I said, sometimes the conductor played favouritism. You know what I mean? It would have been his cousin or whoever. You always heard the old rumours, especially usually in the bar that these people were--. Oh, there was payment in a way, but it was either farm produce or whatever could have been involved. Chickens and eggs. But those years, it was different prices too. At our line there at a place called Donwell, they had the first chickens up off the ground. That would have been in about ’54, I guess, ’55, somewhere in there. We used to go in there, and we used to buy eight to ten cents a dozen, but we bought them just to see how the system worked, eh, because usually chickens were out in the barnyard or whatever. It was different things like that.

Then with delivering, the train we had was if the farmer needed parts or mechanical whatever, it was all on the train, and it was pretty good service, like, from Winnipeg. They were usually ordered out of Winnipeg or Melville or whatever. So if they ordered Monday, they’d get it that week for sure, you know. So there was always good delivery service. They’d come to the train. It was just like a happening for that day. People come, specially Melville when the passenger trains used to come in. CPR here, it’s the same thing as the station here in the old days. But with the smaller towns, I drove through there two years ago and didn’t recognize it because all the elevators were gone. Just disappeared. Then we met people in our travels–winter holidays that come from that area–and that was a quite interesting area with the Dukhobors at Kamsack. And the farmers, like Dauphin, they’ve got the Ukrainian festival. There was always something connected that you could talk about or whatever. Like I say, those farmers in that district, they were interesting, you know, and good farmers. Dauphin is a good farmer. Well, that’s pretty well Uke and Polish in that area and Russian, and then you get down into the other side of Saskatchewan, and it was pretty well all German on the south side of Melville, but those were real good farmers.

NP: If we go back to that first job, you said you did a loop. What was your position on the railway?

RR: I was a fireman. I was shovelling coal.

NP: Talk about that.

RR: I did, oh, maybe seven, eight tons of coal in a day.

NP: Did you choose to be a fireman, or that was the job that was available?

[0:40:03]

RR: No, I hired out as a fireman to qualify as an engineer.

NP: So tell us about what it's like to be a fireman on the railway.

RR: Well, it was--.

NP: In those days when they had the--.

RR: It was interesting because every terminal you had different types of men you worked with, and there was some old timers there that were good, and some were, you know, some were from the old school. You had to put out a lot of sweat and blood to please them in a way because that's what they had to do when they hired out. But as times got easier with oil burners on the engine instead of coal and then the diesel, they were always in between to the point where you weren't a real engineer or a real fireman to come from the old days. But then there was the good ones too, especially after the war. The people that come out of the service after the war, they had a bit of education, you could say. Oh, well, whatever. They learned, and then when they come back to work, then they were real good engineers and people to work with. And like I say, there was five of us on the crew, and you worked with these people, and a lot of them were different.

NP: Let's go through the crew again. So we have the engineer, whose main responsibilities were to--?

RR: Run the engine. That was his job. The conductor supervised the train. He had control of the train, and then the--.

NP: What do you mean by control of the train? What did that mean?

RR: Well, he was the boss. He come up, and he said, "We're going to this, and we're going to do that." The engineer had to do what he said.

NP: Okay. So the engineer, too, I think from what you said before, was also responsible to some extent for mechanical?

RR: Oh, he did all the mechanical. Yeah. And he was responsible for the fireman too. Otherwise, when we left the terminal with train orders, the conductor went down to the operator's office, dispatcher's office, got the train orders, and brought them up to the engine. Now, they had to go through the train orders, and they explained. So the conductor said, "Well, we'll go here because we have a car to pick up here," or whatever. So he more or less--. But otherwise, train orders just told you where to go just on paper. But then if he had anything to do or whatever, well, he was the boss. He was in control of the train. Then when he come into the terminal, we took the engine off the train and went to the shop. He went to the yard office, and he had to deposit the waybills and write up the train, what he had in the train, and what he picked up, and what he set out. He was responsible for all that, see. We disappeared into the shop track and went home, where he had to go and--. And same with coming to work. When he come to work, they told him what type of a train he had, how many, which kind, or whatever, and he wrote it up. He had sheets in the caboose or whatever that he had to write up this train. Usually, they had the waybills, so he would handle all that, like I say. He supervised the train. He was the boss. Then, like I say--.

NP: Then you had the fireman.

RR: Yeah.

NP: A couple of them per train or just one?

RR: No, we just had one. Just one fireman. Not so much here, but the mountains, they had a set up where you could have two engines. They had a pusher type. They pushed them up over the mountain. But outside of that, we always just had the one fireman, and then it was the same thing when we went into diesel. Then we had to get into a new system with steam generators in the diesel. That supplied the steam to whatever. So this was one job that was usually a fireman qualified for.

NP: So just so I don't lose track, I've got my engineer, the conductor, the fireman, and we've got two more left if there were five on the train.

RR: Two brakemen.

NP: Two brakemen.

RR: The one brakeman is in the caboose with the conductor, and the other brakeman is on the engine.

NP: And what does a brakeman do?

[0:44:58]

RR: Well, the first thing is he comes to the shop track and gives us the signal to either back up or come ahead, and he puts us on the train. So he hooks up all the hoses, the air hoses, or if there's--. Well, he wouldn't do the steam. There would be a carman for steam. But on the road, he's responsible. He has to look out the train. He looks over the train on curves or whatever in the old days for dragging equipment or usually a hot box is a bearing on the thing, and if they run short of oil, they catch on fire. If you leave them to burn long enough, the axel burns off, and the tires fall on the track. So this is what he--. It's train inspection. He would get off if we stopped, and there was a certain place where you had train inspection. We'd pull by him slow and stop, and then he'd walk up the other side checking whatever.

Now, we come to a meet. I'm going to meet a train at so-and-so at Quetico, and I have to take the siding. So he gets off the engine and goes line the switch. I go into the siding, and the tail-end man, he'd line the switch back, and then the other train would go. But these are their responsibilities. There's lots of times where I could help, the fireman could help, and then he helped the fireman. Like if we're having a tough trip with a hand-fired engine--. Say we went to Sioux Lookout and were 13-14 hours on duty trying to get home, well, he could fire a bit too, and then if he wasn't capable, I might go out and line the switch for him. So we were working between people on the engine.

NP: It definitely was a crew.

RR: Yeah, it was a crew. The conductor had his own caboose he was assigned. They had a number, 75-125 was his caboose number. He had his clothing in there. He had the icebox there with butter or whatever or food. They had three bunks in there. The conductor slept on one side, and then the two trainmen slept on the other side. We had a bunkhouse. So we went to the bunkhouse, and they slept in the caboose at Atikokan, Sioux Lookout, whatever when we got there. They did their own cooking, whatever. Our cooking facilities were in the bunkhouse.

NP: So when you first started up working on the trains, what—and I don't know if you can answer this—what percentage of the business that you did, like the trains that you dealt with, would be grain trains?

RR: Oh, I would say in this terminal we had the ore. We didn't have potash in the old days, not until the '60s really. Well, the '50s, '60s. But I would say, oh, 95 percent of it was grain. We had, say, out of ten trains in a day, well, we would have what we called a speed train or whatever. It hauled furniture from here to Winnipeg or gas or whatever, you know, like even a way freight. But then like I say, it was pretty well solid grain. Then through time, then the ore cut in. So if we had--. I could say on an average day back in

the ‘60s, ‘70s, we would have maybe seven trains of grain come in and maybe three of ore, and then our regular speed or way freight or whatever. But it was pretty well on that basis. Then some days if the ore wasn’t working--. Like on the north line through the summers back in the ‘60s, ’70s, we hauled one train a day out of Winnipeg, come into Sioux Lookout, and that was a big train. That was about a 140-car train of grain, and that was pretty well daily through the summertime or whatever into the fall. But they were just an overload that there was too much movement. Like our grain that moved on our subdivision, the Kashabowie, had to go to the Rainy River subdivision because now they’re hauling lumber and American, so they were really busy on that subdivision. But I would say we would haul seven trains or whatever.

[0:50:11]

Then we had the yard at Neebing. We had what they called an inbound yard. That’s where the trains come in, and then they were marshalled. The grain was pushed over a hump—just a rise in the track—now it was free flowing. So when the foreman cut off a car, he had switch tenders, and he’s give them a signal or they had a switch list. “This car number is going to track 18.” So the track would be lined for 18. There’d be a guy on top winding the brake and slowing the car down because they didn’t want too much of damage at the bottom end. So they were humping all these trains, so I used to work that yard in the morning and be there for six, seven hours, and I’d push maybe eight or nine tracks over this hump.

NP: Now, when you say you’d push eight or nine tracks over the hump, what does that mean?

RR: Well, we tied on at the far end and pushed the cars. We had a signal. They had a board up there or you could go on hand signals in the old days. Now, they have the radio, but we had a board. It was either “Come ahead” or “Stop,” and you’d just push slow—a mile a week—and these cars just rolled over the hump. So he might have--. Hump riders, they had a streetcar that went down the side of that yard and picked the men up so they could come back and take some more cars down. That was the last of the old street cars at Neebing.

NP: So because I’m not familiar with the process, so let me see if I’ve got this right, and then you correct me. So when you’re working that hump as an engineer, you’re pushing the cars?

RR: I’m pushing the cars, yeah.

NP: And you have to be pretty precise.

RR: Well, I was at stop. See, when the board is up, I move the train. Say I've got 60 cars. I move the train, and as it comes up, he pulls the pin, which releases the car, and then he puts the board down. So when I see the board down, I stop. Now, he's got three cars to go. He's got three cars for this track. So I push ahead, and now I know because I'm pushing that far ahead, and then the board drops again, so I stop. These cars are all going down. Like, some are for Pool 6, Pool 7, Parrish & Heimbecker [P&H], Grain Growers, or whatever. They're all going into their own tracks.

NP: And were there tracks numbered? Like you mentioned going onto Track 18.

RR: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. They called it the clash yard. There were two parts of it. So when they had enough cars on one track, then we had a transfer crew come over from Port Arthur, and that's all they did. They picked up that one solid car of Pool 6 or whatever, took it back to Port Arthur, come back after lunchtime, took another train over there. But these were all different jobs like I could show you one here that--.

NP: Okay. One piece I'm missing here—I'm getting a good picture now—one piece I'm missing is who are the guys at the end of the line that had to take the railcar back or the trolley car back? What were they doing down at that end?

RR: No, usually there was a rehab job. If somebody was hurt or somebody on the job, you could have a job, like, even driving a crew van. They called it light duty, eh? They would run the streetcar. Well, maybe at that time, they had a regular guy because too many guys wouldn't know how to run it, eh?

NP: But who were the guys they were picking up in the streetcar?

RR: The switchmen. Switchmen. These were switchmen that work in the yard all the time. That's all they do. They work as a three-man crew with a foreman. So when they call the hump out, they'll call 15 switchmen and another five or six to run the switches, to handle the switches, and then maybe one or two foreman. So that foreman has jurisdiction over these men, and like I say, it's all on paper or not if they go by signals. Some of the signals you wouldn't believe. When the foreman lifted up his leg and touched his boot, he wanted number 9 switch. Okay. That was number 8, number 7, number 4 when he went like that. But these are all down the lead. Like there was 300 feet of lead there that they were working. So he could give these people signals what he wanted, eh? What switch to line, or--.

[0:55:13]

NP: So every track would have a switchman potentially?

RR: Well, no.

NP: Going into--.

RR: The switchman, he could handle maybe three tracks or four tracks. He'd walk back and forth. He'd line 15, and he's look at his list. "Oh, here comes a car for number 14." So he'd let that car go into 15, and then he'd walk up to 14 and line that switch because the next car is coming down for 14. It was all, like I said, the CPR did it in the same way too, eh? But this was an ongoing thing at Neebing for, oh, I don't think, since the beginning of the railway back into the '20s, I guess. And then it ended in, oh, '70s, I guess. They did away with the hump or whatever. Then everything was flat switch. Flat switching is good too, but in some yards, you had to give it a little kick. You had to get the engine going, and then you had to pull the pin to release the car or whatever, and then you stopped, and then that car went into that track. He lined that switch, and it went down to the next track.

NP: What changed? What changed that it was no longer necessary to have that gravity?

RR: Well, a lot of this stuff was marshalled out west or whatever, and it was just a different set up. I don't know. Like I said, it was taken to Port Arthur. I know we'd take trains to Port Arthur and switch them there. In the old days, it would have been done at Neebing. But I don't know. Just through management, like I say, we lost the hump, and it was just part of railroading. Then like I say, in the yards at Neebing, then it went into flat switching. But then, I think some of that grain must have been marshalled at Winnipeg, at Symington when it come out of there.

NP: When you say marshalled, what do you mean by that?

RR: Well, if you have a train, you have a Pool 6, a Pool 7, a Pool 6, you know? Then when you marshal, you separate. You put this car on this track, that track. Then when you put it back together, then all the Pool 7s are together and all the Pool 6s are together, see? Then when it goes to Port Arthur, they just take that many cars. They don't have to switch it there or marshal it there. It's all made up. The same with--. Melville used to be a terminal for marshaling cars for western Canada. Trains come out of Winnipeg, and they come to Melville, and they'd line up the Saskatoon, the Edmonton, the Vancouver, or whatever. It was all switched out there and then put in blocks and then the train put together. So when the train got to Saskatoon, all those cars were on the head-end, 20 cars. He set them off at Saskatoon and then went to Edmonton with the rest of the train.

NP: Who did that figuring of what went where?

RR: Yardmasters. They had all the bills. They had talked with Winnipeg. They talked with Toronto or Montreal. They all had--. Then a lot of the terminals, it was routine, you know what I mean? This is the way it was, and if they were ever doubtful, well, they could talk to these other people. Then when I hired out, we were still with Morse code, the old key, eh, that the operator sat there and did his jiggling. That was interesting, you know, to watch these guys. Then all the orders had to be repeated and clearly and defined. When you said "One" you had to spell it, O-N-E. The number five, you had to spell it to the people that dispatched this order, the dispatcher in Winnipeg. He'd give it to you, and then you had to repeat it back. So you're listening to these guys talking, like, when they said, "O-N-E," well, they were spelling one. They had all these different sayings, you know?

NP: Short forms.

RR: Yeah. Because there couldn't be any mistakes.

NP: What happened if there were mistakes?

RR: Oh, boy. We had a couple. I wasn't here. I was in Melville. They had a couple of head-ons. Just misunderstood the orders or they were bad orders. So somebody missed something someplace. There was--. Well, human error. This is what it was. Nowadays, you blame the machine, eh. But like I say in those days, it was error. The mainline on the--. I was working out of Melville at the time. I wasn't old enough. But that was really something after the war with the troop trains and the times getting good with the grain industry and then the potash in the '50s. But to see those lines out there working, and they were all manual. They were all done manually really. Years later, we got the radio, made it a lot better. And same with my brother-in-law. He worked up on the NAR at a place called McLennan in Alberta.

[1:00:34]

NP: NAR?

RR: Northern Alberta Railway. In those days, it was taken over ten years by the CN and then ten years by the CPR, and they run it. Now it belongs to the CNR. But he watched the Peace River. He went up there in '42, and then he watched the Peace River open up with the grain. "You wouldn't believe it," he said, "the grain that come out of there." And real good grain in those days too. Yeah, he worked up there about 40 years, I guess. That was good times.

I was up there a couple of times visiting. Then with the operators disappearing or whatever, we went into where we copied our own orders into what they called a manual block system where I copied the order on the engine. [Laughs] If it was conductor only, then

the conductor would copy it, or if I had a full crew, the brakeman would usually copy. But I always had to repeat the order back to the dispatcher that it was corrected, and then it was initialled that it was correct or whatever. And that's just running from point A to point B. They give you authority and that type of rule just to go from point A to point B. And if you understood it and repeated it, that's what you did. Followed the lights in there were lights, and if there were no lights, well, you went from point A to point B..

NP: You mentioned earlier on when you were speaking that--. A really good description of going into the small towns in the Prairies and dropping off the cars.

RR: Oh, yeah. That was like a--. They had everything. They had groceries, they had their liquor, they had their mechanical supplies or whatever, and this was a regular thing. It was just an everyday occurrence for them, and they depended on it. And the only thing good about the service was that no matter how bad the weather was, we always went to work. It could be 40 below and a blizzard or whatever, the trains were moving, a little slower than usual, but you always got there.

NP: So what was the--. As an engineer, you had done the same thing. Like the first time you were talking, you were talking about going through there when you were still a fireman. So what did you learn, if anything, about the grain industry from going from little elevator to little elevator in the Prairies?

RR: Well, like I say, just on how it moved and how long it would take to get from the Prairies to Thunder Bay or maybe the western terminals. It was just the idea, like--. And then you talked about it, eh, because you depended on it. Like, we could go to work and say, "What kind of week are we going to have next week?" Well, the CN would get more or less a lineup. "Oh, we got grain coming out of Humboldt." If we made up a train now of tanks here the last years I worked, we'd make up 90 tanks for Humboldt or 90 tanks for Saskatoon, and these just went to these--. These terminals ordered them because they needed them, whatever, and then the turnaround was that "When are these tanks coming back?" Well, then it would depend on the elevators, and it was the same thing coming in here was management was always worried about the turnaround. So we were put up against--. We were a seven-day operation, but the elevators were only five days. We had boats coming in here and tie up on Friday until Monday before anybody worked them.

So the union--. And talking with the people that I worked with and the grain handlers or whatever, and I said, "We're a seven-day operation. You guys got to go work seven days." "No way. We're not going to go to work on Sunday and this. We want triple time and whatever." This young switchman there, he said, "You know, someday you might be looking forward to go to work on Sunday." Because I think that one renegade—I shouldn't mention his name—but he handled the union here. He went to jail too, eh, that handled the grain handlers' union. Too much personalities involved in unions. I seen it in our union. But with him, he was, well, not really a dictator, but he was more or less telling the men what they should do and what not to do.

[1:05:44]

It was the same on our job, our union. We elected a chairman, and then we had a general chairman, whatever. So we went in to negotiate. The people we elected, I don't know, sometimes they might have been a little short on schooling or whatever, but when the company put up their committee, they were lawyers and guys with big adding machines or whatever. So I always said--. The union knew when I left there I paid $80 a month for union dues. So I always said at different meetings or whatever, "We should hire lawyers to negotiate our problems, eh?" I think we would have got a better deal. You know what I mean? Then you could have said, "If you get us this, you get so much money. But if you don't get us whatever we need, you're not getting any money on that basis."

So through the years, I was really disappointed in these people in the grain industry because, like I said, we were seven days and--. Well, those were the conditions I hired out on too, eh? They said, "When the phone rings, you go to work." But with them, like I said, I think they were spoiled in a way. The conditions were there, especially with the big wheat sale, and we knew they were coming because management comes to us and says, "We're getting a lot of movement here, and you guys just do what you have to do and run your business, and we'll back you up." Because sometimes with management, they wanted to run the job, eh? But when they let the men run the job, they got the work done on those conditions. But with the elevators, like I said, I was disappointed in a way through the years, and then you could see the West Coast Pacific Rim coming, eh? Even with potash.

NP: So you left in '92, so things were just starting to really shift to the West Coast.

RR: Oh, yeah.

NP: What kind of impact did it have on your--?

RR: Oh, it did. We got down to so many crews. Like I can show you on here later we had so many crews working, and then--. Say we had in a week, say we had 25 crews working, then it just kept reducing, so we might have got down to 10 crews. Mind you, the trains might have been a little longer or more grain too, eh, because the cars got bigger because of the tanks or whatever. But we did lose. You could feel it, you know what I mean? We never got that extra train anymore, like the overtime train or whatever, because that type of job disappeared. It levelled that out. They got so much and whatever the elevators could handle or whatever. So it was really never anything that was a little extra.

NP: Were you still working, too, when they started to close down the little Prairie elevators?

RR: Oh, yeah.

NP: Yeah? And--.

RR: Well, like I said, I used to drive to Melville pretty well yearly, and then if we go south for the winter, I'd always swing up. Shirley has a sister in Edmonton, and we'd go up there and visit, and then I'd stop in at Swift Current or Melville. Sometimes then we wintered on the coast on the island for six, seven years. So going through the Prairies, you could notice it every day or every trip that that's missing or that's missing.

NP: Did that have any impact on your work as an engineer?

RR: Oh, yeah, because like I said it's--. Where we lost a lot of the jobs too were places like Cargill where they do their own cleaning or whatever on the Prairies, eh? You'll see the big elevator out there, and he's got 20, 30, 40 cars. Well, that was all one movement. That elevator, when they were taking three or four cars at a time, they would have that many trains stop or switch or way freight. So those jobs are gone by. Those jobs are lost on those conditions. One thing, it's just automation, and you felt it down the line. Like when I left the job, things were never so good. We had good power, we had good tracks, and good people, good radio communications. People up in the office could understand what we were doing, and I said, "Jeez, I'm leaving this damn job when it's just getting half decent." Compared to years ago with the way things were run, it was a little different. Well, it was--. My satisfaction was based on time. If I could go to Atikokan in the shortest time, that was a good trip, so this is what it was based on, usually it was movement. So like I say, with equipment better and just everything in general, you got better movement. It was faster.

[1:11:15]

But just to watch the grain even with the farmers. I hauled grain out west to a little elevator. I had a wagon box with two horses. I had 70 bushels on there taking it to the country elevator. It was only four miles to go across, so I'd take it to the elevator and dump it. Now, I see the trucks. Those elevators are gone, but he's going another 30 miles on land, but he's got 700 bushels on that truck. So those types of jobs was the same on the railway.

NP: Talking about changes, and you referred to it, I think, in a little bit when you were saying that when you left things were looking pretty good. What about the—if I've got the term right—what about the rolling stock? The change from the boxcar to the--.

RR: Oh, it got a lot better. Oh, yeah, with the roller bearing.

NP: Did that have an impact?

RR: The roller bearing was--. If you wouldn't believe the problems we had with the old ore cars and old boxcars. Oh, some of them! [Laughs] Then as they aged, then replacement. They said, "Well, we'll leave it." It was the same with the steam engine when we lost the steam engine. We had terrible steam engines because they wouldn't do proper repair because they'd say they're going to be obsolete next year. So you'd come to work, and it was the same with the cars. But with the new roller bearing now, like I even asked Gary, we even have new coupling. Like, on the air hose there's two hoses and they fit together. They have a rubber gasket in there. In the old days, in the wintertime, we had to have air, so we had brakes. So in the old days, they had this old hard rubber or whatever, and it would never make a proper connection, so you had leakage. Leakage there and leakage on the pipes because in the old days, the pipes were threaded, put together by a pipefitter. Now, they're all welded, so there's no leaks in the joints. So that cured that problem.

So I asked Gary on these long trains. He said they have like a neoprene rubber in there, and it's a real soft rubber, so when you put it together, it seals, eh? So when it's 40 below, you've still got a pretty good seal there. So that's one big change because we've sat at Sioux Lookout how many years and--. Well, you know how cold it gets at Winnipeg and Sioux Lookout. [Laughs] Trains sat there for hours maybe until the sun come up before they could get air to get a proper air test and a proper brake before the train could venture because we have rules. I had to have my pressure on the engine, and the conductor, same thing or whatever. These were rules that were put out by the Board of Transport. Board of Transport used to get on the engine every once in a while. I've got a pair of boots on, steel toes, safety boots, and they've got a zipper on the side. He looked at me, "you can't wear those boots." "Okay, no problem. I'll have to get another pair." Simple fact that if you were in an accident, they wanted you to have laced boots so they could cut the lace to get your foot out of the boot. This was government laws. And I'm sitting--. All I'm going to drop on my foot is a pencil, really. Other guys had wrenches or whatever.

But anyway, you pleased these people. You did what you had to do. You always had things like that. Then, like I say, getting back to the rolling stock was just unreal. Nice operating trains too, eh, compared to the old days because in the old days when you went to [inaudible] you had so much leakage that half the time you had to come to a stop or whatever. But with the new equipment, you could set the brake and release it and just keep on going. It just managed that much better compared--. Same with the diesels too. We had the first diesels come out, they were just--. Well, General Motors had the best, and they were good diesels. They were easy to maintain, easy on breakdown. But then we used to get Montreal diesels and Alco's, and then we had a Fairbanks Morris diesel come out, but they more or less put those on passenger trains eventually and got them out of the heavy-duty movement. But through the years, the power got real good. The management, the people in maintenance were real good. So things just got that much better. Like I say, the track–just everything in general. You know, usually, it's like a highway. You travel it one year, and 20 years come back, and it's a superhighway. So it was the same thing on the railroad.

[1:16:14]

And they had better machinery for maintenance. Years ago, 90 percent was by hand. They had to fix the track or whatever. But now, they have--. Well, you see it's all on rubber wheels now too, eh? Easy to get at. The old days, if they wanted to fix something between here and there, well, they had to occupy the track. Now for them to get there on the track or whatever, that was another half a day. But nowadays, they go by highway, and if there's a crossing there, they say, "Okay, we're here at the crossing. We need this track for half an hour." So the dispatch will give them the track for half an hour, they do their job, and they're gone. But otherwise they'd be another hour and a half using the track to get there, eh? Things like that that really, really helped the job, made it more suitable and whatever.

NP: One of the things that we've heard about when we talk about boxcars in particular and having them in the yards in the Thunder Bay area was how some of the product in some of the boxcars would disappear, the grain and so on. Was that ever a--?

RR: Oh, this was--. I lived in the East End. I lived in the East End on Mclaughlin Street in '52 whatever. These people down there—well, it was the old timers too, the immigrants, whatever—they usually had chickens or a source for grain. So when they come from Pool 7, they always had a bag of grain on their bike and a couple of boards or whatever. This was usually swept out of the cars, eh? There was a crew at Current River, a family, they did that for a living. When those cars come out of Grain Growers or Pool 4 or whatever, they go in there and sweep the cars, and sometimes there'd be an inch or two. But in the old days, they had an extra wall in the car, and on top it was open, and at the bottom was open. So this grain would shift and get in behind this wall, and then it would come out. Well, as they dumped the car or whatever, not all that grain come out. So the car was moved back into the yard. So these guys would go sweeping cars. They got a half-ton truck there. They got 10-15 bags of grain on there, and we'd just been only there only 20 minutes. So they'd get their grain.

But oh, theft wise, I guess in the East End that was old time stories when they said they used to drill cars. They'd be on the bridge or something and hold the bag underneath, but I think a lot of that stuff was stories too. But now with the conditions on the railroad, it's against the law to trespass, eh? You're not supposed to be on railway property or whatever. But in those years, it was an ongoing thing. Like, there was lots there for everybody too, eh? Then even with the elevators, if you worked a job--. I could be working Pool 7 regular, so at Christmastime, they usually had turkeys for you and cigarettes. Grain Growers was the best. They had a little bit of rye, but it wasn't in a bag. [Laughing] Oh, yeah. These were for their workers, for their crews. Great Lakes, same thing. They had turkeys and different--. Like I say, you give those elevators a service, and then it got to be ritual. You know what I mean? I knew Ray Cousineau. He was a superintendent at Grain Growers. So whatever he wanted from the crew, he knew the crew coming in.

Sometimes you might have had to do some extra work in the rain or something, you know, that he wanted an extra move here or something, but sometimes he made up for it too with a little gift or that this was--. You know, "You rub my back--."

[1:20:19]

NP: So show appreciation.

RR: Yeah. Well, that's what I'm saying. But like I say, most of the jobs were ritual. Like when you come to work or the foreman come to work, he looked at his list. He'd say, "Oh, we're going to have a better day today than yesterday," because he knew how long it was going to take and how many cars he had to do and whatever. But to service the elevators, like I say, and then--. There was different things there, but--. Then usually if they got a couple of car loads of peas, well, pea soup would be on for that week. Oh, yeah. Albert, he worked at Ogilvie's here for I don't know how many years, but like I say, with--. And if the guy said, "Oh, we've got to buy a hambone today on the way home," then you knew that there was peas. Then they said, "Well, birds are going to have a good winter." Well, there was a car of sunflower seeds come in. So there was enough on the floor, or they'd go sweep it up and take a box home or whatever. But like I said, I don't know if it's--.

NP: But it wasn't an issue on the train as you're moving from west to east? What was in the car usually ended up in Thunder Bay? Like there was no loss through leaky grain cars or--.

RR: Oh, yeah. Back in--. When they had the Russian wheat sale and the inbound where the trains come into Neebing, there was a lot of grain there because some of these cars were rushed, you know what I mean? They needed the cars, so if the car got to the repair track, maybe the foreman would say he got some nasty letters about holding up these cars too long. They needed them. So he'd tell maybe the work crew that, "Do a hurry up job on there." Well, maybe where they should have been welding or something to fix it, they'd fix maybe the major thing and let the other one go. So you'd be coming down the line. Oh, we had--. Even on the line, they'd have cars to set out. They were leaking that bad or whatever, but usually they get in the yard. And then if they got a little shifting, if it was a little rough on the cars, then whatever was the shape of the car, you could start them leaking just by rough handling or whatever. There were lots where you'd see rags hanging out. So down the line, the carman went along and plugged the holes. But then through the years when the tanks come out and the better cars whatever, then that pretty well all disappeared.

NP: Some people said the birds along the railroad lines were disappointed when the tanker cars came in.

RR: Yeah. We were on the north line, and I hunted out west. I hunted. That's another thing. Farmer come into the bar in the evening, and that was the days of threshing. He said, "I've got a field full of stooks. You come out in the morning. You can have breakfast,

and I'll supply all the shotgun shells for the day just to keep the ducks off of the wheat." But like I said, I come down the north line out of Sioux Lookout, and I'm looking, and I said, "Those aren't partridge. It can't be. They're too big for partridge." You know the damn things were Prairie chicken. And like I said, those were the years when we were hauling that grain, and they were in the old-type boxcars and whatever, and there was a lot of leakage. I told that one old timer. I said, "I know a Prairie chicken." "No, that's a partridge." Sure as hell, the guys went hunting out of Graham, and it was Prairie chicken. They'd come down that far, eh, just for the grain. Otherwise, like I said, and then moose and deer and roadkill and bears. We had a logbook at Neebing saying how many deer, you know, if he hit a deer or whatever. I hit a deer at—or a moose—at Anita. It had two calves. The mother was gone, but they come out of the helicopter and picked up the two calves. I got on the radio and let Winnipeg know, so the MNR come in there and picked them up. But other places, they were isolated. Then the wolves would come. They used to be interesting, you know, to see the wolves on roadkill because, oh, it was dynamite between here and Conmee years ago for deer. Well, we used to get on the pass, we'd be doing 65, 70 miles an hour, and those damn deer would jump in front. I'd get to Port Arthur, and I'd be looking at the front of the engine to see if there was any there, but most of them got away. A lot of roadkill. Yeah.

[1:25:22]

NP: I'm going to just take a pause now to see if Ian has any questions to ask. I have some specific ones, but you've covered most of them in just your answers to the other ones. So Ian, anything that--?

ID: I have two pages of questions, but I'll--. [Laughs]

RR: Okay!

ID: Fascinating stories. Can we just go back to your first trip to Atikokan as a fireman in 1950.

RR: Oh, yeah. Okay.

ID: Just tell us a little bit about that. What kind of a locomotive was it?

RR: We had 4,000s here. They were heavy-duty locomotive for handling the type of traffic we had here. We had ore. So it was an oil burner in later years, but when I worked, it was called--. You had two stokers, two types of stokers. You had a standard stoker, where the coal was pushed in at one level in front of the firebox door, and then the other one was a duplex stoker. It had two elevators that come from there and into the tender. It brought the coal up on the plates, and it was fed into the firebox on two different sides.

So in those days, it was usually the coal that mattered. We used to get coal from Estevan, and we called it a hay coal. It was almost like powder or flour. Then we used to get what they called a Brazeau. That was from Alberta. That was a better coal. Then they arrived at briquettes. Briquettes were like on a fire, like on a grill, eh? They were about that size. The better the coal, the better the fire. So it was just the idea that if you were firing, you didn't have to take too much guff from the engineer because your steam was always there because if the steam wasn't there, he could give you a rough time. [Laughs] But then they were pretty good too.

So you'd leave here. Say we left here at 18:00, 6:00 in the evening, and you could see the lineup that was coming into Neebing. They would have a lineup of how many trains are out of Winnipeg and Rainy River and Atikokan. So you'd get a lineup of how many trains you're going to have to meet, or pretty well that you're going to meet on the road. So, "Well, you're going to meet three or four trains." "Well, that's good." So you'd set things up, and you're going to go here. Now, you know the engineer coming against you because you've been working the same terminal, and he's a fast engineer. We had fast and slow. So you know you're not going to be there that long because he's coming, and he wants you to get out of the way too, so he can get home. The other engineer might be a little slower, so through time, I would say, if it took you, oh, maybe seven hours, eight hours to get to Atikokan, that's with trains to meet.

ID: Would you be hauling grain?

RR: Not west. All empties. All--. Unless you have what we call the speed train, eh? They take the furniture and--. But otherwise, all our trains were empties, just for the one or two trains that go west. They would have loads because--. They might even have some grain that come out of here that was going back out west for some reason. But anyway, through time, and then with--. You had to take water. We had a place, just the other side of Conmee, a place called Glenwater had a water tank. Kashabowie had a water tank.

ID: Did you have to stop there?

RR: Oh, yeah. They pull the big spout down, fill the tank. Then it depended on the engineer again. If the engineer was a good engineer, they had a way of running the engine where it wasn't going to use that much steam or whatever. It was all in the valve gears when they set up the engine. So if you had a good engineer, you might only have to take water once. Then if you had a heavier train or a bad running train, then you might have to take water twice on the road, so this was time. With coal, it was the same thing. You might have to stop at the dock at Kashabowie or at Quetico. You'd have to take coal, so that would take 10-15 minutes. So all combined, like I say, if you got over the road seven hours--. Some, there wasn't that much traffic, you might get home in five hours, and then the other way you might be 14 hours. But we had a rest clause. They could only work us for 12 hours, and then we were able to book rest. So if I know I wasn't getting to Atikokan, I was going to get through Quetico, and I was going to book rest, well, they could send out relief, and they would take over or he would take over. Otherwise, they might tie up the train. If there was some

place where they could take you for accommodation that has a room and a meal or whatever, then they would take you, but that was very seldom that those things were happening.

[1:31:20]

ID: Can you jump forward four years to October 1957. What changes would have been taking place? Would you still have steam locomotives then?

RR: No. The odd one. I figure I fired the last steam locomotive out of Melville in 1960 before I come here, but they were intermediate. What happened, like I say, the job I worked, that loop job, had the last steam engines because the mainline went full diesel. So they put these out on the branch lines, the steam engine, and that's where they run. Then they would have a steam engine in the yard for mediocre jobs—changing cabooses or whatever. If I come into Rivers, the guy from Winnipeg had his own caboose, the conductor had his own caboose, and the guy from Melville had his own caboose, the conductor, so we had to change cabooses. So when they come in from Winnipeg, I took the steam engine off the shop track, picked up the Melville caboose, and parked in front of the station. Then when the train come in, I changed off with him, and I pulled the train down and stopped, and then he took the Winnipeg caboose off and put the Melville caboose on. That was a changeover. That was ritual. All the trains did that until they got run through cabooses. But like I say, with the steam engine, they disappeared off the mainline, and then it was a novelty sometime. They might bring a train out of Winnipeg or something with a steam engine.

Then in the '50s, late '50s, they started moving power out of the mountains, the steam engines, because they were getting diesel because that's the place that they needed them, eh, for power and whatever. So we used to get their power out of them often. That was nice, real nice steam engines. So you had the high 6,000, 6060 Ford that had green running boards on it. It had a bullet nose on the front of the thing with the headlight and the valve gears. You rode in that, well, we were taking cars out of Melville to Rivers or whatever, and that thing just run like a soul machine on the track compared to other engines. Boy, you go down there, you're going 55, 60 miles an hour just like a soul machine in comparison because the other ones were lumbering and loose because, like I said, they weren't really looking after them that good because they were phasing them out, so.

ID: Would these new steam engines be on the Thunder Bay grain run?

RR: Oh, yeah. They were the 4,000s they had. They had small drivers. The wheels were only that big where the other engines they were higher. Passenger trains were 6'6"- and 7-foot wheels—that was for speed—but these were for power, eh? So our speed limit here was only 35 mile an hour and 45 mile an hour on doubled track. On the track from here to Conmee, we used to have two tracks. Then, like I say, these were phased out last. The CN used to borrow from the States. We used to get them from Mattabi Mines, eh?

They have steam engines. We used to work them, and that was the big grain rush. They brought these engines up here, and we might have had 10, 12 of those come up that we used up here.

ID: And that would be in September, October, November of the year?

RR: Yeah. Well, all summer really, but we shut down here pretty well in December, eh? Well, yeah. Right into December, I guess. But they got that many units in.

[1:35:14]

ID: Last question I have is not related to the railway so much, but all of your relatives seem to have a military connection.

RR: Yes. I had three brothers in the service. I was in the militia at Port Arthur. Well, this was through the Russian deal, eh? The Cold War. They put a unit together in Port Arthur, so I was unemployed at the time, so I went over and joined that unit. Then I stayed in the armories, just Tuesday night parade or whatever. My wife, she was in the--. She used to do the lab work for the armories at Port Arthur years ago. But then my brother, he was in the militia too at Melville. It was just a thing to do, eh? It was a gathering. They had an officers' mess at Port Arthur. They'd let you in there once in a while. But otherwise, like I said, all of the--. And then Shirley's brother, he was a superintendent out at Toronto. He was in the Air Force. So quite a bit of military.

NP: Back over to me. There is grain shipped out of Thunder Bay by train down east.

RR: Okay.

NP: So tell us a bit about that.

RR: Okay. Through the years, I guess that was back in the '80s, late '80s or whatever. In the wintertime, the grain movement was so good that we actually brought grain here in the wintertime, and they cleaned it or serviced it, and we put it in cars and moved a train a day to Montreal from Port Arthur. That would've been between 80 and 85 tanks we used to haul. But that was a plus for us. Like, it put an extra yard to work or whatever just because, like I say, some winters it shut down pretty tight. So that was a good grain movement then. I always asked them, "How does it--?" Oh, that's a good paying deal for us, like, the railway people, eh? So that was a real good deal, and the same with some of the elevator workers. So I think there was about four or five elevators involved. Like, you had to go to certain elevators, say, Pool 7 and pick up 12 cars, or go to Grain Growers and pick up so many cars, and then during the day they put this train together, so he'd leave in the evening for Longlac to the mainline. But that was a good plus.

NP: Was that a temporary thing, or did it--?

RR: No, that was regular. Well, just for that span of years. I don't know how many years that went on for. I know it's six or eight for sure. It was extra work for us too, eh? They called us for a lot of those trains because, like I say, that's a different area. Their men usually come out of Toronto, and we had the terminal here big enough with laid off men, so it gives the men extra work here.

NP: I'm going to ask you some sort of less practical questions. So I don't know whether you have anything to say or not, but the question is have you ever thought about how your job contributed to the success of Canada as a world leader in grain export?

RR: Oh, I think it was a 100 percent deal between the railroad and the grain. It made the country, really, I figured to the point where if it wouldn't have been there, I don't think we would have half of what we have today, you know what I mean, because of the grain or the railways.

NP: Say that--. Expand on that.

RR: Well, I look at it as a renewable resource. You know, you can depend on it from year to year, where there are other commodities where--. We watched the mines go down. They were good when they were running, but all of a sudden, they disappeared, and we more or less depended on where the grain was–in my time of railroading was a sure thing from year to year. So this is what the economy or the style of living or whatever was based on, eh? If the grain went good, the economy went good. So this is what it has really been. Same with the railway jobs because, like I say, through the years when we had five-man crews, I was disappointed when I left because there was only two of us on the train. I think the company in itself was making a lot more money than they did when they had five men on the crews, so. But then--.

[1:40:24]

NP: But it helped build the country as far as--.

RR: Oh, yeah. It opened up a lot because we had trackage that I never believed was there, especially out of Bigger. We had trackage going down to the salt mines and the oil fields. I never realized that they were all jobs, good jobs, where a person really doesn't realize until you see it or work it how many it employed or how it affected the economy.

NP: I think you've commented very well on changes that occurred in the industry and in your job over time. Are there any others that you wanted to add? I don't think we talked much about what I recall as a major issue was the removal of the cabooses.

RR: Well, that was on a maintenance deal too because when they did get the new cabooses, they were better. They were all oil-fired. The old-type cabooses were coal fired to start with, and the new ones had an electric generator on them. So you could get your lights and refrigerator and the finer necessities compared to the old caboose. So really, they didn't lose that much. Then they got better sleeping quarters because if you had to see three guys sleeping in a caboose when it's 110 above out, now they moved into the bunkhouses. We had super bunkhouses in the last days where we had a commissary. Look on the wall, there was canned tomatoes. The fridge was full of bacon and eggs, and the bread was there. You could make up a breakfast. They wanted, what, five cents for a slice of bread and 10 cents an egg? You could sit down and have breakfast and coffee and toast for $1-$1.50. So it was an honour system. There was a slot in the counter, a box there, and it got real good. They had Campbell's soup. Like I say, they even had a fridge with ice cream or a freezer with ice cream for the young guys, eh? But you could go over to town, buy a steak, come back. The pans were all there to cook up. Air-conditioned bedroom. Your own air conditioning, showers, towels, you know, just the whole bit. So the conductor really gained in a way, you know what I mean? He didn't lose that much. It was in the company's benefit too, eh?

NP: So from a safety perspective, it didn't create any difficulty because they used to--?

RR: Oh, they had better safety when we had cabooses. America demanded it–bullet-proof windows. We had our trains that go through the States here, and they had bullet-proof windows on those cabooses. They had to have an American-style caboose even. We hauled trains to Port Arthur, the last hotel on Kingsway, shooting at the train. So the one night I'm at work, a fellow by the name of Marty Crawley, he come by. The police had it set up. This had been ongoing for a month or two. They figured he was in Vickers Park shooting at the train. So then we have a train movement. The police said, "Get over in the station." Marty Crawley went by. This guy up on the second room's got his screen cut out about that much and a .22 pointing out. So finally, they got him. You know what they tried to give them? The guy told them he was shooting at skunks. [Laughing] Hey, I asked Neebing. I used to take a train to Port Arthur, and I'd say, "What's the fellow?" "Oh, he's just shooting at cabooses." I said, "You've got to be kidding. You've got that in writing?" I said. But finally, they caught him. But then, like I say, going through the States that's because--. Well, it wasn't so much bullet-proof as shatter-proof because in the States people get up on these overpasses, and they throw bricks. We've had engineers killed down there and hurt because the kids they get up there and throw all this garbage and whatever, so.

[1:45:15]

They stole the van in San Antonio on me, and we come up through Chicago by train, and we come up usually where the tracks are. It's always a little rough section of town. You know, we're on that passenger train coming in through Chicago Station, and these kids out on the street are throwing stones the size of golf balls, and they're bouncing off of the coaches. I said, "This can't be this day and age, you know." The police could have went out there, but no, that's an ongoing thing people on the train told me. [Laughs] I says, "Unreal." But through the happenings, this is why they had this type of cabooses, eh? They had to be fed out, and same with the engines. They had a shatter-proof glass or whatever.

NP: Besides dealing with change—and it sounds as if you did very well with dealing with change and welcomed it—what were challenges? What did you find most challenging about your job?

RR: Well, we really never run into that much help on the train in general. If we had a problem on the train, say it was near the tail end, in the old days they had a caboose because we have detectors now. You go over a detector, and if there's something dragging or smoking or heating or whatever, the detector picks it up. Winnipeg calls you, you stop your train, and they'll give you the car number. They know exactly on the train. So the conductor or tail-end man would walk up, "Oh, yeah. Well, we've got a brake rigging down." It's just bars that hold the brake shoes on and sometimes they wear out or the pin falls out. So they'd wire it up or take it off or whatever, and you'd go. But now with one person on the crew, he's got to walk all--. Like Gary at Sioux Lookout, he had some bad happenings on the long trains. You were there three or four hours trying to solve a problem. This way in the old days you were there, what, five, ten minutes? So these were the conditions, and then the equipment got that good so you weren't going to have that many happening, not like the old days. So these were the things I worried about just on the job itself and getting across because if you had a problem, you delay everybody else too, eh, because they can't get by. These were the only things that I ever come up against. It would have been the problem itself, you know?

But otherwise, like I say, it was coming, and it was all being bought. The company offered the men money, $25, 30, 60, 70,000 just to reduce the men. It was the same thing with the engineers. They got a buyout because they reduced so much of this and that. They put two trains together instead of one so they could reduce one engineer. But things like that. But, like I say, on the job itself, I thought it was real good in the last days, but then those were the conditions that you accepted, eh? And this is all being voted on by the union. So the last year that I worked, they were going to have the extra men that come on the engine or the men that took over, they were going to have clean windows and maybe sweep the floor–just menial jobs on the engine, which was usually done on the shop track, where some of the kids said, "Oh, we can't do that." So then they had to put it to another vote later that year. People lost out on some buyouts that reason. Well, they just prolonged them, that's what it was, and then when they voted it in, then they reduced so many men.

Then the CN has its own unemployment Insurance deal, really, with the certain men to a certain year, up to about, oh, ’85 or something like that where when they laid you off, you didn’t go to get unemployment. They put you on what you called a furlough board, and they paid you so much a month to stay at home because they didn’t need you. So if you were making $6,000 a month, they might pay you $4,000 a month just to stay at home, eh?

NP: So that you would be there when they needed you.

RR: Yeah.

NP: Which--. I need to ask Ian, how’s our time?

[1:50:00]

ID: This is a very long interview. [Laughing]

RR: Yeah! Talking too much.

ID: It’s at an hour and 50 minutes.

NP: Okay. And it’s a two-hour tape?

ID: No, it’s actually four hours.

NP: Okay. But I won’t go much longer because actually I have to be out of here.

RR: Well, whatever.

NP: But I mentioned that just so that they’d have you when they needed you. What was the relation between CN and CP from the perspective of engineers? Were you--.

RR: Oh, I don’t know. I think all through the years, I think we had a better deal. I think we had a better contract, you know, different. They weren’t major things, but just little ins and outs with different happenings. I figured the CN--. Well, maybe they think on the

same line too. [Laughs] But I was just saying, like I know—well, not quite a few—I know a few engineers where we compared different happenings and whatever.

NP: So once a CN or CP man, always a CN or CP man? They sort of stayed where they--?

RR: Yeah. Well, that's pretty well. Like I said, there might have been some terminals if they shut down or whatever that somebody would have had to move, but otherwise, it's--.

NP: Okay. One final question from my perspective, and that is do you feel it's important to preserve and share Thunder Bay's grain trade history? And if so, what aspects of that history do you feel we should concentrate on?

RR: You know, I said, oh, years ago, they should have set up Pool 6 as a museum. You know, they had the train. The CP went and got the Via train or whatever. That was the start of it. But you know, there's a conflict for some reason between Fort William and Port Arthur. [Laughs] It's been there. I noticed it ever since the '50s. Curling, hockey, whatever it was, they can't get together. I think Pool 6 would have been an ideal spot to get a steam engine and some railway equipment, and then they got the elevator equipment all in there. There was a good road into there. Well, there was a road. It wasn't that good, but the workers used it. You could get in by road, and that area was going to open up eventually like it is now, eh? And I thought Pool 6 would have been an ideal spot for it. But then I give some books and whatever to the people that run that Via, that museum. I wrote my mechanical on that engine in the old days. I gave them all my mechanical books and exam books and whatever. But like I always said--. And then when they parked that caboose at the waterfront there, that wasn't very good because, like I say, the railroad was a steam engine. They were all to be had because 90 percent of them were cut up. We had a boat come into the Mission. They were loaded for scrap for Hamburg, Germany. That's where they took them, and the CN would have glad--. If you would have taken that engine and take it away from them because it costs them a lot of money to get rid of it really in a way--.

NP: Are there any left?

RR: Rainy River and some of the places do have them, but I've never seen any around that would be available or whatever. But I always thought that would be an ideal place because it's in between the two cities too more or less, eh?

NP: Are there any questions that we haven't asked you that you think we should have asked you?

RR: No, not really. [Laughing] Well.

NP: Well, it's been a wonderful interview. You have a fantastic memory and--.

RR: Well, that's good. It's all there.

NP: Even better experience, yeah. We'll come back and take a look at the papers. We'll have a scanner where we'll scan things in.

RR: Good.

NP: So when we actually get the scanner in our hands, we'll borrow that from you and scan them in and return the originals.

RR: Good.

NP: So thank you very much.

RR: You're welcome.

NP: It's been worthwhile.

End of interview.