

Narrator: Richard Ross (RR)

Company Affiliations: Simon Day Company, Port Arthur Shipyards (Port Arthur Shipbuilding Company)

Interview Date: 20 February 2009

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Summary: Sheet metal worker and boilermaker Richard Donald Ross describes the wide variety of work he did throughout the country, some of which brought him in direct connection to the Canadian grain industry. He begins by recalling his father's early work in Baird, Ontario as a subsistence farmer and hired thresher. Ross then recounts his earliest experience with Thunder Bay's grain industry: watching the explosion of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Elevator 4B in 1945 from the family farm. Ross's work as a welder then led him to installing dust collection systems on two terminal elevators in Thunder Bay, and he explains the danger of elevator machinery in dusty conditions. Ross also describes his brief time at the Port Arthur Shipyards, where he helped construct vessels. Ross discusses the other jobs he held throughout his career in his desire to expand his experience, including dismantling a refinery in Lethbridge, farmwork in the Prairies and British Columbia, staking out iron ore mines, working as a boilermaker for various companies, and working in the pulp and paper industry. Other topics discussed include special schooling to become a welder, accidents and injuries on the job that he witnessed and experienced, his concern for health and safety, and labour unions.

Keywords: Grain elevator disasters; Grain elevator explosions; Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Elevator 4B explosion; Sheet metal work; Skilled trades; Trades work; Boilermakers; Dust control; Dust collection system; Grain farmers; Ontario agriculture; Farm equipment; Welding; Port Arthur Shipbuilding Company; Shipyards; Ship construction; Thunder Bay terminal grain elevators; Alberta agriculture; Prairie agriculture; Grain producers; Seeding; Threshing; Harvesting; Iron ore mines; British Columbia; Accidents and injuries; Workplace fatalities; Pulp and paper industry; Health and safety; Labour unions; Canadian Paperworkers Union

Warning: *This interview contains descriptions of workplace injuries and fatalities that some readers may find disturbing.*

Time, Speaker, Narrative
EE: Well, good afternoon, Richard.

RR: Good day, Ernie.

EE: Let's start by your giving me your name, and then we'll work into an interview about your involvement with the grain trade and probably other things as well.

RR: Richard Donald Ross.

EE: And you were born in Port Arthur, I understand.

RR: Right.

EE: But you grew up here in the village of Murillo.

RR: No, in Baird. It's just about five kilometres down the road.

EE: Okay. Towards the present city of Thunder Bay?

RR: The city. Right.

EE: Right. And was your father doing something at Baird at the time?

RR: Well, my father was farming at the time. He worked in the bush with a lot of other contractors, and that was in the off seasons. But most of the time he was farming, and he did jobber contracting locally for, like, threshing with a threshing machine. He used to go around because not everybody could own a threshing machine, so he'd go in from place to place to thresh the grain for the local farmers. That would be everything—oats, grain, barley—whatever they had. Wheat. That's what he did.

EE: And Baird is where your farm was?

RR: Yeah.

EE: You grew up on a farm?

RR: Right.

EE: Was it a mixed farm?

RR: It was a mixed farm, yeah.

EE: So you had livestock of various--.

RR: Livestock, right. Basically, mainly in the last few years that my dad was farming, he was used to make hay locally all over the place--bales of hay. We cut hay and baled hay, and he would sell it to the pulp companies for their teams of horses in the woods.

EE: Oh, yeah. So you were using baling equipment, but out there in the woods, they were still using horses? Of course, this was--.

RR: Right, yeah.

EE: Because you were born in 1932, so if we fill in--.

RR: In the '30s and then into the '40s they were still using horses.

EE: Into the '40s.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Because the mechanization of woods doesn't really get under way--. And initially, it's chainsaws, I guess, in the late '40s and into the '50s. It's well on--.

RR: Well, not--. Very few chainsaws. It was all by hand. Horses were the mainstay in the bush> Actually, they started out with just tractors for bringing in the longer sleigh trains to the main loading areas, and it was trucks after that.

EE: Sure. Caterpillar tractors, I suppose.

RR: Tractors and trucks.

EE: Yeah. And with horses out there, the horses would be fed with grain that the farmers had grown as well.

RR: Grain and hay, yeah.

EE: Hay as well as the grain.

RR: Hay and grain. They needed the hay for the roughage—good Grade A for the roughage—and they needed the grain for the protein.

EE: Sure.

RR: To stabilize the--. In order to keep the horses going in the winter when it was cold.

EE: What would your father have grown in the way of grain on his own fields?

RR: Wheat, oats, barley. A mixture of everything. Whatever we would need for our own use. We only grew it for our own use. We didn't grow anything for commercial use.

EE: Right. Did some of the farmers in the area for whom he was doing the job harvesting, or the threshing with the threshing machine, grew--?

RR: Well, what they would do is they would thresh it all, and if one had extra, they would buy and sell and trade among each other for in order--. The basic farming in the area was hay was actually the fuel to move around with, and horses was your fuel and your mode of power to till the soil and firewood and all that kind of stuff. And the rest of the stuff was used for chickens and hogs, you know what I mean, which was the mainstay of life. And then the horses, actually, for potatoes and the root vegetables and stuff like that.

EE: In terms of--.

RR: Most of the farmers used to have that, their own root cellars and root vegetables. They were self-sustaining.

EE: Well, was it actually pretty well entirely self-sufficient farming then?

RR: Yeah. The total area was all self-sufficient farming.

EE: Was there no cash crop at all?

RR: No. Well, there'd be the occasional one, but not too many.

EE: Nothing as a matter of course.

RR: Not like it was out in western Canada.

EE: No. And was dairy farming taking place as well?

RR: Yeah. There was a lot of dairy farming in there. Heavy.

EE: Well, that would be a cash crop, I suppose. Milk for the--.

RR: No. That was an income for people who had it.

EE: Yeah. Selling their milk to the dairies.

RR: Selling milk.

EE: There were quite a number of dairies in the area once upon a time, weren't there?

RR: Yeah. There was Fenton's and there was one on John Street. I forget the name of it. Wakefield, I think, it is. They were--.

EE: Kellogg?

RR: Kellogg's, yeah. Kellogg's were in there. Kellogg's was the big commercial one. They had trucks hauling the milk, even at that time.

EE: Into the dairy from the area.

RR: Into the dairy in town.

EE: Because they wouldn't have been bringing milk in from outside the region, I don't suppose.

[0:05:00]

RR: No.

EE: This was actually produced here.

RR: Yeah.

EE: So a certain amount of the agricultural product, the grains that were growing here--.

RR: Went into self-sustaining.

EE: Went into these dairy farms to--.

RR: And self-sustaining for--. Like I said, the main thing was transportation and power, and those things were our horses. In order to maintain that transportation and power of horses.

EE: Sure.

RR: I can remember buckboards in the wintertime. In the winter. And in the summer, carried the horse drawn carriages. I remember. I can remember my first Model T. My mother broke her arm trying to crank our first Model T we had.

EE: Because they could backfire, could they?

RR: Yeah.

EE: Yeah. They were tricky. I never worked one, but I heard about them. When would you have had that Model T?

RR: That was in the '30s.

EE: Oh, it was as early as that?

RR: Like '34, '35 because we were--.

EE: When you were just a little guy!

RR: Yeah. I was just a kid, yeah.

EE: And your father--. Was there any tractor purchased?

RR: Yeah, we had a Wallace tractor then. Great big Massey Harris Wallace, or Massey Harris, or Wallace tractor. It was probably the Massey.

EE: Right. Was that steam or--?

RR: No, it was gas.

EE: Gas.

RR: Four-cylinder, gas. Great, big chug-a-lug.

EE: Oh, yeah. Right. Yeah, they used to make the tractors quite the size. Your father's, the threshing machine, was powered by this Wallace tractor, I suppose?

RR: This Wallace, yeah. Tractor, yeah.

EE: Yeah. The big flywheel and the belting and so on.

RR: Yeah. No, no. Not like the John Deere. It had a big drive wheel. He used it because it could maintain the belt torque on the threshing machine.

EE: Right.

RR: That's why he used it.

EE: Sure. Good power to do that.

RR: He was a mechanic. That's what he did in his spare time in the bush. He would do mechanical work in the bush.

EE: Oh, yes. So he'd be away in the wintertime in the bush camps, as a matter of fact?

RR: Yeah. Bush camps doing mechanical work, yeah.

EE: Yeah.

RR: He worked with local contractors too, like Erikson, who used to have--. There was a couple local contractors around. He worked with them too.

EE: Sure. And so you grew up on the farm.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Went to school?

RR: In Baird.

EE: In Baird.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Right. And you were working on the farm when one of the most exciting things in your life happened.

RR: Yeah. Well, I don't know if it's really that exciting, but to me it was just another incident that occurred. You know, I mean, one of them.

EE: It helped to be some distance away. [Laughs]

RR: Oh, yeah. That thing, yeah.

EE: How far from the waterfront—the elevator—were you would you say?

RR: Well, I'd say about 12 kilometres.

EE: 12 kilometres.

RR: 12.7 kilometres.

EE: Well, you've got it measured out.

RR: Yeah. As the crow flies.

EE: Yes. Right. So, what, you were out--?

RR: I was out. My dad had made a precut field that was just east of what is now still there, the greenhouse. It's VanDoren's greenhouse now. It's the one for planting trees on Oliver Road. Hill's. It used to be Hill's.

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: And we were just on the field south of that. Now there's three houses in there, and the trees are grown up quite high, but at that time, the tree level was fence-level because everybody used to cut all the wood out for fuel. And then they'd allow their cattle to go in and pasture. They used to keep the brush down. Now all this stuff has grown up into first growth trees. It's almost commercial wood already. Just about.

EE: Yeah. So it was a clear view you had in August of 1945.

RR: Yeah. Yeah. I could see. As I was making my second run around the field, it was in between the horses. They were just lined up in a certain area, and I could see the sun shining on the elevator. The sun was shining on the elevator, and I could see the silos and the blockhouse above that. And then--. Do you want me to go on and describe that?

EE: By all means. Describe the scene that you saw and so on and so forth.

RR: What I saw was, first of all—the first thing that I saw—was an immense cloud of brown dust flying out of the elevator and the silo flying all around. And then after that it became more violent, like straight up. The dust sort of got blown up and with it the workhouse. It went from the silos up and it was spinning in the air as it went up. And it must have went up at least about two or three times the height and thickness of the workhouse. And then from there in that cloud of dust, it fell back to the ground, and then I heard the noise and felt the noise. I actually heard and felt the noise. So something disastrous had happened, so what I did was I hooked up the horses, and I went to my mother, and I told my mother. She immediately called a guy by the name of Bisson who she knew worked at the elevator. She called up Mrs. Bisson, and she said, “No, he was scheduled to go to work at a later time.”

[0:10:16]

EE: What time of day was this roughly?

RR: About 11:00 in the morning.

EE: In the morning.

RR: I'd say about 10:00, 11:00.

EE: Yeah.

RR: Around 10:00 or 11:00, just before noon.

EE: Sure.

RR: I would've taken a noon-hour break anyway, so I went a little early. So I just unhooked the horses, left the thing there, and got on one. And I trotted back to the house. It took me about maybe 20 or 40 minutes, I guess, to get back home. And I told my mother, and then she called. You know what I mean? I saw that she called.

EE: She didn't know anyone else who worked in the elevators. She was--.

RR: No. So she just wanted to make sure that--. She was kind of hoping that nobody locally--. That's the only person we know locally who worked at the elevator. And she called.

EE: I see. You were about 13 at the time, I guess, were you?

RR: Yeah. Yeah, 12. I was cutting hay in the field, about 12 or 13. Yeah.

EE: Yes.

RR: 12 or 13.

EE: Now, I don't suppose you got the chance to go into town to--.

RR: No, no.

EE: Check it out, to look over what had happened?

RR: What I saw was pictures in the paper after.

EE: Right. And--.

RR: Heard descriptions from other people.

EE: Yes.

RR: That's all I heard about it after.

EE: That must have been quite the event to be able to see that at 12 kilometers! [Laughs]

RR: See that, yeah. I was wondering what the heck was going on. I heard about the war, and there was always war pictures and damages and stuff like that coming through what they called the *Star Weekly*. Lot of photographs.

EE: Out of Montreal, I think?

RR: Oh, yeah. Well, *Star Weekly* was part of like an insert in the newspaper.

EE: In the local paper.

RR: Yeah,

EE: Yeah. Yeah, there was a time, I think, in the farm in Manitoba when I may have seen the *Star Weekly* too growing up on a farm outside Winnipeg.

RR: Yeah. They call it the *Star Weekly*. It was just like *Life* magazine. Picture stories.

EE: Yes, yes.

RR: Photographs. Good photographs. And the ones they would allow to come back from the war, you know what I mean?

EE: Sure.

RR: They didn't want to show too gruesome details, close details—gruesome—in case of identification.

EE: No. Not when it ends up in the living room on the coffee table as well, for that matter.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Did you have a chance to talk to anyone who had worked at the elevator at the time? Or did you--.

RR: I talked to the person there who was working there, Harry Bisson. I talked to him, and he didn't want to talk very much about it. He says, "Just a big mess." He says the people were out there working at it for two, three weeks later, and they were still cleaning up. And still looking for remains.

EE: Right. For the bodies and the remains of those who had been killed.

RR: Yeah. So they didn't want to talk too much about it until they found everything. As much as they could identify.

EE: Right. Yes. Yeah, it was one of the worst disasters, I think, that ever happened on the waterfront as far as the elevators were concerned. There were other explosions, smaller ones--.

RR: Yeah, but not as bad.

EE: But not the size of that one.

RR: There was one after that I was working--. Like I went to work at the place, and it burned everything. Around the elevator all the dust had accumulated, so that must have made a terrific fire. And I don't know if there was an explosion and that, but there was a fire in there anyway.

EE: Right. Yes. You just murmured something about working at Manitoba Pool.

RR: Yeah.

EE: How long did you do that?

RR: Well, we were working a dust collection outfit for--. It was a dust collection outfit. It was a great big, humongous, large tank with a vacuum fan on it which sucked dust from all parts of the elevator. And after the fan had sucked it in and swung it around, spiralled it around, the dust would settle in this tank after. That was their way of getting rid of the dust out of the elevators. I built two of them. One for two elevators over from Manitoba Pool. Like if you look at the waterfront today, there's about four or five elevators there. The first one I worked on was about the second one from the end.

EE: From the north end?

RR: Yeah.

EE: Or south end?

RR: From the south end.

EE: From the south end.

RR: And then the next one I worked on was two up. It was about the second from the north.

EE: In the early '50s. And you were working for what company?

RR: I was working for two companies. One of them was Simon Day, and the other one was--. Andrews was the boss of that. I just forget the name of the company.

EE: Andrews was the boss of the second company?

RR: Yeah. Well, the owner of the second company. I think it was--. I just forget the name.

EE: And so, these companies were both in construction at these facilities?

RR: Yeah. They were sheet metal contractors.

EE: Right.

RR: They worked parts of the elevators all over the place.

EE: You worked in sheet metal work for many years, I guess, did you?

RR: Well, I worked sheet metal work for about maybe nine, 10, or 12 years, I guess.

EE: Through the '50s?

RR: Yeah, on and off. But mostly my main trade was actually boiler making because I worked in the refineries, like storage tanks or refineries, and refineries themselves.

[0:15:11]

EE: Okay. Sure.

RR: I think the earliest one I worked on was the dismantling of the Hub refinery in Lethbridge.

EE: Oh, so you've worked in the west.

RR: Oh, yeah.

EE: Been away from the city..

RR: Oh, yeah. I worked in--. And the part I don't like about that is at that time, the people in that part of the country that I talked to, "You mean to say we're going to get money for this?" And they were blowing it off, you know what I mean? And the farmers complained about it because the stuff was hanging around their fields and their cattle.

EE: Sour gas.

RR: They didn't like the smell. So then when they took the gas out of the ground, they took the sulphur out of it and then pumped it into lines for natural gas. I think. I'm not sure about the chemical--.

EE: Well, I've seen yellow sulphur in piles laying on the ground at some of these plants in the west when I was driving through them in the 70s.

RR: What I don't--. Yeah, yeah. They were just--. That's the sulphur they were taking out of the gas.

EE: Yes.

RR: And what I do know is that when you pump gas up, it's just like a firehose. When it goes uphill, it's fairly pressurized, and then in the wintertime when it gets real cold, a lot of it liquifies. And then when it starts to go downhill, it starts to collapse the pipe. So then instead of allowing the pipe to collapse, they've got a check valve, which allows the air or gas to go in to replace that. Pooped the quality by the time it gets to us.

EE: Yeah.

RR: Sometimes it won't even ignite. The furnaces won't ignite, and that is why because it's diluted.

EE: I see. Nothing like being a working man on the ground when it's being put in to be suspicious about what could happen.

RR: Yeah. And they haven't looked after all the engineering qualities. Like when it comes to quality control, you have to check at the high points on all the ends. You know what I mean? Otherwise, customers could be deprived of the quality of the gas they're getting.

EE: I see. Right. What training did you have to do this work?

RR: Welding.

EE: You were trained as a welder?

RR: Well, I took an ICS [International Correspondence School] course in welding, and then I came--.

EE: Good old International Correspondence Schools!

RR: Yeah. And then there was nothing there out west where I was working to actually train how to weld under different codes. So I came over here and worked at the shipyard. I got what you call the "inland shipping code."

EE: Okay.

RR: It's just like a CWB [Canadian Welding Bureau] thing.

EE: Right.

RR: I got CWB, and I got fire-pressure vessel, which is like boilers and stuff like that. And in the meantime, while I was working on the refineries out in western Canada, I got what they call, like, for petroleum engineers. Their licensing thing in that kind of work. So I was pretty well covered, and then I got a few sheet metal things here with Andrews and with Simon Day. I was able to do their work to their standards.

EE: Tell me more about the Simon Day and the Andrews work.

RR: The grain?

EE: We'll talk about the Port Ship a little later, but this first is connected in its way.

RR: Simon Day--.

EE: I mean, here you are controlling dust that led to that terrific explosion.

RR: Yeah. Yeah, well, that's what the work was. The idea was to control dust, and there were also environmental problems out east in shoe factories and stuff like that too. To make it healthier for the workers there.

EE: Yeah. On the shoe factories, they'd be cutting leather, wouldn't they?

RR: Yeah. Cutting and grinding leather.

EE: And in the process--. And grinding the leather. And in the process, they were generating a lot of leather dust, I guess.

RR: All that leather dust, yeah.

EE: Leather dust, I guess, can be as explosive as grain dust is.

RR: Explosive, but it's hard on the health because you suck it into your lungs and those chemicals they used. This is what a lot of engineers don't think about is they have a process, and then even when--. The last job I was working on at Avenor, what they had was they were having a de-inking process.

EE: At the papermill?

RR: At the papermill. They had a de-inking process, and they added that to their sludge. And their sludge—when they took the chemicals out of the sludge so that they could pipe it to the furnaces so they could burn it—what they were doing is while they were piping it, they were also piping the gas into the wood room. There was an area that I was working in you could see sort of where the window's sunlight was, and that was in the air all the time. It made a constant low-level carbon monoxide poisoning to anybody who worked in that area. And I was complaining about it. It was affecting me, and I complained about it. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You know what I mean?

[0:20:02]

EE: You just endure it.

RR: Yeah. It's part of your job.

EE: So you've become quite a keen observer of occupational health and safety.

RR: Oh, yeah. I'm watching it, and to me what they do is they design stuff, but they overlook little things, you know what I mean? It's just like the smoke from a steam engine used to bother people, but the steam engine was only there for a few minutes, and then it went away, and the air was clear.

EE: Yes, yes.

RR: But if it's there 24 hours a day, it's serious.

EE: Right. So the system—to stay with Simon Day and Mr. Andrews' company for a few minutes—in both of these cases, you were building, first of all, the large tanks into which the air was drawn from the elevators then?

RR: Yeah. It's what you call a stabilizing tank. It was like the air would be drawn in. It was drawn in like a centrifuge. It would go around like a tight bag. Like the air that you were sucking the dust with would go out the middle on a funnel, and all the dust would go into like a funnel and into the big tank.

EE: Right. I see.

RR: It's just like that vacuum cleaner the guy is making today, the bagless vacuum cleaner. That was the same idea.

EE: Mmhmm. I see. Was any use made of this dust or was it just--?

RR: Well, they used it for feed pellets. If it had any food value, they'd use it for feed pellets for hogs and whatever, and the rest of it went to fuel.

EE: I see. So you could make money from several parts of the stuff that was being pulled out of the air, which previously had just polluted the air, the air of the city, and affected the health of the men who were working there, I'm sure.

RR: That's right. We did that for two companies. We did that. I don't know the names. The elevators, there's only two elevators that I know there that put up that type of tank.

EE: And this was in the '50s already?

RR: Yeah, yeah.

EE: So you don't remember which companies it was, actually, that--.

[... *audio skips*]

OM: Andrews.

RR: Yeah. John Andrews, yeah.

EE: Oh, John Andrews. Oh, yes.

RR: Yeah. John Andrews.

EE: And do you remember which grain companies, whose elevators you were doing this for?

RR: One was Manitoba Malting. Manitoba Malting, and the other one was, oh, gee. I don't think it was Saskatchewan Pool. I think it was one of the Saskatchewan Pools.

EE: Now were the other elevators ignored, or did other companies do other elevators?

RR: Well, other companies were doing elevators. I saw where they didn't put up these single big accumulators, we call them. Dust accumulators. They had a whole bunch of small ones. You know what I mean?

EE: Right. And this was happening already in the 1950s then?

RR: '50s, yeah.

EE: The dust problem remained to some extent, though, into the '70s.

RR: But not as bad.

EE: No. Not as bad. Did you have any involvement with the later phases when they went to work through the 1970s to really solve the problem completely?

RR: Well, I don't know. [... *audio skips*] The problems of, actually, the explosion where it started. Where the fire started. And it started, apparently, what they call static electricity with the belts. So they started making ground--.

EE: Grounding the pulleys and so on.

RR: Grounding the belts every so many feet.

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: If they didn't ground that belt, like, because you have dissimilar metals—dissimilar metals and dissimilar materials—the belt itself would create static from just like a Van de Graaff generator would create a static charge, and it would let go. You know what I mean?

EE: Yes. Sure.

RR: I seen those sparks let go 15, 20 feet! So that's--. You know what I mean? Some guys got whacked in there. They got hit with that.

EE: The marvel is with the kind of equipment because these belts had been running for years--.

RR: Years. Nobody ever thought about it.

EE: They were just plain lucky that--.

RR: Well, any place that those belts where you transported coal like that, and it was dry and dusty, very minute particles after screening or something because every one of those belts is like a potential Van de Graaff generator. Like you cement is nonconductive. You mounted most of your boilers on cement, and sometimes you'd have an interconnecting line. A lot of them had interconnecting lines. Like, they would run an electrical belt line would be right along the thing and would be attached close to it. It would ground them all.

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: That was just a happy accident.

EE: Did the ICS courses that you took have any part of them relating to these kinds of problems?

RR: Well, the ICS courses taught me--. Like I didn't go to school enough, you know what I mean? I quite school and started working around 15, 16, working on my own.

EE: So you had Grade 8 or 9 education?

RR: Yeah. Yeah. So from there, I guess, I came back to my school teacher, and I showed her the courses that I had done, you know what I mean? She was a teacher, a registered teacher, near us. But she wrote me a regular equivalency was at Grade 10 or so.

[0:25:13]

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: You know what I mean? I just--.

EE: Sure. The courses were very much focused on what was needed for--.

RR: Yeah, for welding. They were all the different--. Introduced me to different types of welding that were involved at the time, the sources of the power for welding, and the electrons that were used. Electrode identification, the gas identification, and the torches.

EE: Yeah. When did you learn that? When did you take the welding courses?

RR: Well, that was, it had to be 1949/1950.

EE: Would it be into the '60s? Oh, yes. I see. That early.

RR: Yeah.

EE: I'm smiling partly because my father, who would have loved to have been an engineer—but there's a story to why he wasn't, so he farmed in Manitoba—when he got the chance in the early 50s, he bought a welder that had been an aircraft generator, I think, which Princess Auto and Machine in Winnipeg either purchased for someone else or themselves adapted. It was obviously had a very--. [... *audio skips*] Hooked it up to an old combine motor, internal combustion engine. And he'd start the thing up and get the power flowing and started--. He taught himself to weld through the 50s and got to be very good at it. In fact, in the early 70s, he ran a machine shop in the Carman area, a welding shop, and did a lot of work until he retired in '75.

RR: Carman area?

EE: In Carman, Manitoba.

RR: One of the first jobs when I went across the west—you know, when I was travelling across there—the first place I worked was a place they call--. It was on a farm travel grant, you know what I mean? I got as far as Winnipeg, and then I says, “Well, how do you find work in here?” “Well,” they says, “they want all kinds of people out there in the farming area.” So I went in the farming area that they gave me. They gave me a thing and says, “You want to go work as a farmhand, here. Get on this bus.” You know what I mean? It was a travel grant.

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: And away I went. I went from there to a place they call Waskada.

EE: Right.

RR: I worked at places like Joe and Alec Selleck. I was out there throwing the stooks. So I had a hard time. Like I was young, eh? But they fed me good, and after about two, three weeks, I was up to their best that they could get—real healthy guys.

EE: And this was, what, in the late '40s?

RR: Yeah. Late '40s.

EE: I see. So you got into grain production?

RR: Yeah. Yeah, I was a--. They had a threshing machine. They was still all stooks then in this area. That particular farm was all stooks. And then in the same summer, I worked across there. I went from there. I jumped from there, and I went to a place they call Brant, Alberta. I went with a guy by the name of Brant Parker out of--. While I was--. Now, I want to mention this. See, I don't know if it was coincidence or what, but while I was in this place Waskada, I voted for a guy by the name of Duff. And I heard this guy was in there in politics for three sessions for provincial, you know what I mean?

EE: Right.

[... *audio skips*]

RR: Was Duff. [Note: likely Duff Roblin]

EE: His last name was Duff. Well, we'll have to check. Was this a provincial election?

RR: Yeah, provincial election.

EE: Manitoba election.

RR: Yeah. And then the next guy I ran into, I went out to Brant, Alberta—was just out of High River—and I ran into, while I was in High River--. I was working in Brant. I was doing the summer fallowing, planting, you know what I mean? With the one-way plow.

EE: Yes. Right.

RR: In that area it was all one-way plow. And one-way like a big disc with a box on top.

EE: Yes, it's a--. What size was the one-way?

RR: It was about a 30-footer.

EE: Oh, so it was a discer size, as they called them in later years.

RR: Yeah.

EE: With the seed box on top?

RR: Yeah, yeah.

EE: My first memory of a one-way disc was, I think, probably eight or nine feet. Quite a modest thing with the discs turning.

RR: Well this, he was a 30-footer. Well, they used a J. D. Case to pull the thing.

EE: Sure.

RR: He got there, and he got me--. First, I was summer fallowing with it, which is quite deep, and then when you go to plant grain, you only just touch the surface.

EE: Just sort of turn the grain over on the seed that's dropping down out of the box.

RR: Yeah. And you really move that thing. JD Case was a tractor that really had to move. That the grain trade I worked out there. Then this guy Brant, what he was on Saturday he say, "Well, we're caught up." He says, "Us and the whole family are going to go to High River for a day of celebration." A celebration, you know? So we went to High River, and who did I run into? Was a guy with a drugstore cowboy outfit, and the guy his name was Joe Clark. [Laughing] Yeah! It was Joe Clark, and he was handing out posters, you know? Political posters.

EE: Right. Well, I was wondering when you said High River whether it was Joe Clark you were building up to.

RR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EE: Good old Joe.

RR: That was Joe Clark. So I met him there. I said to him, I says, "What's going on?" He says he didn't know either. He says, "But what I'm worried about it is we might be creating unlawful assembly." He says, "You know, I'm worried about whether or not they're going to charge me with creating an unlawful assembly," because he was handing out these folders, you know?

[0:30:22]

EE: Well, it should be all right. This is a fairly young Joe Clark that you'd be meeting at this point.

RR: Yeah, he was fairly young because I was fairly young myself. I was only 15, 16.

EE: Right. Yes.

RR: And then after I had finished that job working for Brant Parker, the farmer, after all finished, he says, "We're finished for the season." Now he says, "You can stay here if you want." Well, I said, "No." He had an older son who suffered a polio attack. He was the same age as I was, but he couldn't do anything. And then they had another son, Teddy, and another daughter, Arlene, I think it was. And his wife.

EE: Oh, yes. This sounds like the early to mid-'50s. Or is it?

RR: Yeah, somewhere around there.

EE: Because the polio--.

RR: No, no. That was in '52. Well, it was getting around the early 50s.

EE: Yes, because the poliomyelitis--.

RR: Because in 1952, I was working here at the shipyard.

EE: Ok. So just before that.

RR: It was after that I took my ICS course. And from there I went to a place in, what the heck was it? I ended up in Kelowna, BC, and I ran into--. So I said--. I was out there just picking apples for different farmers, you know what I mean? I was picking apples

and pears. And I worked for one Chinese farmer who had apples and pears. So I worked those, and after I was finished that, I ended up in Kelowna, BC. And while I was in Kelowna, I walk into the store. I was asking around, “Where can I find farm work here?” Well, he says, “You want to do that,” he says, “go and see that guy who works in that store.” And you know who it was? Bennett. So I ran into what they called Bill Bennett, and Bill Bennett sent me to--. He said, “Go to the UIC. You have to--. Well, the first thing you’ve got to do--.” He says, “What kind of work have you been doing?” I said, “I’ve been working farm work, picking apples and what have you.” He says, “The first thing you’ve got to do is you get yourself registered at the UIC office.” Because they just started that.

EE: Yeah. Canada Employment Centre.

RR: Unemployment Insurance, yeah.

EE: Yeah, yeah. Unemployment Insurance Commission.

RR: So I went there, and I registered with that. And after that, I was talking to Bennett, and Bennett sent me down with a piece of paper, and they said, “Well, okay.” He says, “Send him to the Kelowna Exploration Company.” So I went to the Kelowna Exploration Company. I went to a place north of Trail, BC. And while I was there, there was a guy who was waiting for his—he was a colonel in the army—he was waiting for his discharge. And I figured it was Pattison. You remember that guy who became the millionaire? I figured it was him that was the boss of that. I’m not absolutely certain. But this Pattison, Jim Pattison. It’s almost the same spelling as the Paterson over here, but it’s Pattison. P-A-T-T, different spelling.

EE: Ok.

RR: And well, I worked there. I want to tell you a little bit about that stuff. That stuff was there, I worked for this guy. They were test drilling across the edge of the mountain. You know what I mean? A bunch of holes. And I looked at the thing, and I looked at him, and I looked at this place where we were drilling, and I says--. Where we’ve been drilling here, and I looked across, and I says, “Well, it sure looks like whatever it was that hit here--.” A meteorite had hit the mountain from the west side and slammed into the ground. So we were drilling up there for reserves, and what we were doing, every 100 feet, he says to me--. The way I got hired for the job was a real joke. First of all, I was told to go by bus. I’ll back up a little bit. I was told to go by bus to just a little railroad depot.

EE: From Kelowna?

RR: From Kelowna.

EE: Yeah.

RR: And while I was there, the guys says to me this is where I was supposed to get hired. So I goes in there, and he says, “Well, go in there with the rest of them.” There were about 25 other people standing around. And he says, “Okay. Stand in a big circle.” So everybody’s standing in a circle. He says, “Sam is going to pick the guy we’re going to hire.” So Sam--. He comes out with a donkey. He says, “This is Sam.” [Laughing] So all right. I was a guy who always used to have carrots in my pocket to eat, and of course, Sam goes around to everybody and comes up to nuzzle my carrots in my pockets. So I give him a carrot. And the guys says, Pattison says, “Okay. You’re hired.” [Laughing] So, fine. Because Sam liked me, that’s all he wanted.

[0:35:05]

EE: Sure.

RR: And he took the first train of donkeys—which was about 100—and I took the second train, which was maybe 60 donkeys. You know, leading the donkeys up the side of this mountain. So I guess we went about seven miles, I guess, from the train depot. Seven or eight miles. It was an all-day trip. You start in the morning--.

EE: Yeah, sounds that way.

RR: And about maybe shortly after noon you got to your destination. A bunch of tents, World War Two tents, you know? Peaked tents. A whole bunch of them out there. There was a crew out there working already. They were all drilling with one-inch drills, you know what I mean? And the stuff that we were bringing up were tools for larger drills for greater depth.

EE: This is drilling by what means? Compressed air?

RR: No, gas-driven diamond drills. We were taking samples for the ore they were taking out of there.

EE: Yes.

RR: So when I was there, one of the first jobs he gave me, he said, “Okay, take Sam, and Sam’s got a pile of stakes on him, painted.” He says, “Go every 100 feet in the straightest line that you can figure out from here up to that tree. Every 100 feet.” So I had 100-

foot chain which I dragged behind me. Like it was just a cord with a paper bag on the end that was like a plastic bag. It was quite high. You could see it at 100 feet. So when it got even with the stake, you'd pull it. When it got even with the stake, you'd put another stake down, then you just pull past that stake and go to the next one.

EE: Right.

RR: In a straight line. So every one of those holes, they started drilling where I left the stake. They'd drill. And then he says—halfway in the middle—he says, “Is there any place in the middle there where Sam stopped?” I says, “Yeah, he stopped in the middle of that little mound.” I said, “There was a few berries there, and he was nibbling at it. And so was I.” He says, “Well, you go there,” and he says, “you go perpendicular. East and west as close as you can to the edge of the mountain.” I didn't want to go too close because the stuff looked like it was a sheer face.

EE: Yeah.

RR: And it was split. Like it looked like a pyramid type, you know what I mean?

EE: Sure. Beware of fallen rock or falling rock.

RR: Yeah. It was coming down all the time. And the other side--. [... *audio skips*] I put those stakes in there. We started drilling them. And we were drilling in the summertime, and it started to get cold. And a couple of the guys we were drilling with—I guess they were Doukhobor boys from around the area--.

EE: Yeah, there could be Doukhobor boys there all right.

RR: And they didn't know how to speak English. They'd get a cheque, and they wouldn't know how to cash the cheque in order. I had two pairs of underwears. You know what I mean? We used to put on the dry pair today, and if I took it off tonight, it got wet, it hung on the thing, and it would freeze overnight. And then through the day it would dry up, and then by night--. I would go in at night and get into a dry pair and go to sleep. And I used it the following day. So I had one I recycled. So one of those guys complained to Pattison. He says, “He can't go out. It's too cold.” He's too cold, he says. So being an old military guy, you know what I mean, if you saw something around there--. He says the guy was complaining about too cold, so he gave the other guy my underwear. You know what I mean? I had nothing to change, so I got cheesed off, and I said, “To heck with you.”

EE: Yeah.

RR: Then it was payday. They gave us a cheque at the end of the day. So I got my cheque, I went down, and I never went back.

EE: Right.

RR: And I worked for what they called Beardmore Ironworks, and that's where I took my Correspondence course.

EE: Oh, the ICS courses in welding there?

RR: Yeah.

EE: Right.

RR: Well, they did welding there, but I used to go visit people in Lethbridge at Liberty Welding Shop where they tore down the refinery. One of the jobs, spare time, tore down the Hub refinery just out of Lethbridge. The firemen, the fire department, used to go out there every day when they were running. They used to have an explosion or fire every day. [Laughing]

EE: These weren't practicing.

RR: No, you know what I mean?

EE: They were the real thing.

RR: Just what they call make-do stuff. But they were producing stuff, and they were wasting more stuff than they were producing.

EE: Sounds like it.

RR: So eventually, they shut them down.

EE: Yes. Well, you've had some interesting times. '52 is the year in which W. A. C. Bennett led the Social Credit Party to power, and he had the hardware store in Kelowna, I believe.

RR: Yeah.

EE: So you met his son Bill, I take it, then?

RR: Yeah.

EE: Who became the premier in the '70s.

RR: Provincially, yeah. But the guy who eventually went into that television mogul and stuff like that, I figured that he was that guy. He made himself a bundle on that.

EE: Right. Okay. Well, we'll have to check around for him.

RR: Now, I'm not absolutely certain, but as far as I know, there's a connection there.

EE: Yes. And the--.

RR: He still owes me a pair of underwear! [Laughing]

EE: Right. Yeah, do you remember what town this mine operation was close to? You said north of Trail, but--.

[0:40:04]

RR: It was Slocan. It was Slocan.

EE: Oh, you were up Slocan Valley. Well, you had Doukhobors around there all right.

RR: Yeah.

EE: I lived in Nelson for nine years, so this is not exactly my front yard, but I know the territory pretty well.

RR: The area I was in where the train depot was a changeover from train to trail donkeys for these mining companies.

EE: Yes.

RR: And it was designed for that.

EE: The old Kettle Valley Railway, I think, was it not, or--?

RR: I don't know if it was that old.

EE: No.

RR: But--.

EE: A friend of mine has just written a history of the Kettle Valley Rail--. [... *audio skips*] Summer, so I must take a look at that to see what--.

RR: A few summers ago, I went to visit my daughter who's living in BC. And we were flying over, I looked at that hole in the ground, and I said, "That's the one that I staked!" [Laughing] You know what it was? They were taking out silver lead and zinc there with--. You know at [inaudible] how they go round and round, how the iron ore mines look here? But this was about 10 times bigger than the iron ore mines like that, and they were taking out silver lead and zinc for the last 40 years, and I still think they're taking it out.

EE: Is this Princeton? The big mine at Princeton?

RR: It could be. But the thing was that--. It could have been. Maybe it was out of Princeton. I don't know exactly the name of it.

EE: Because the old Princeton highway now is the one that you'd do crossing over the mountain, and you run by a big mining location quite close to Princeton. And then, of course, you carry on through in towards Trail.

RR: Yeah. The thing that led me to that was I went down, and after I was finished working, this guy I saw, I went back to the city where I cashed the cheque, and I was looking for a job. I says, "I just wonder if I could get a job in the smelter." They said to me--. What they advised me was, most of the people advised me not to work at that. They said, "If you go to--."

[... *audio skips*]

EE: Lots of Italians worked in the lead smelter at Trail, and I'm sure they died early. Yeah, that's another story.

RR: That's what I was told at the time.

EE: Oh, yeah. I don't doubt it at all.

RR: And that's why I got on the bus and went to--.

EE: Mr. Blaylock who managed that facility in the inter-war years had a big mansion beyond Nelson. And the papers he left behind were explored by one of my friends who was also at Nelson back in the 70s. And he came upon this letter from Mr. Blaylock saying, "What would we do without our Italian workers." You know? "These guys don't go on strike; they work through thick and thin."

RR: Until they die.

EE: Yeah. He didn't comment on that, but they were steady workers.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Well, should we jump back to Port Ship? You were mentioning having worked at the shipyard for a while. You were a welder, and I know that the welders are highly prized at Port Ship. How long were you there?

RR: I was there only 18 months.

EE: 18 months. Through a winter?

RR: It was long enough for me to get my identification as a certain type of welder.

EE: Yeah. [... *audio skips*] Be the Domtar Mill, or it was already in existence?

RR: Rebuilding.

EE: Rebuilding.

RR: Yeah, rebuilding. We enlarged the size of it. And then I got a job with the scrap outfit to dynamite and knock down the big yarder that they had there. It was 1,200-tonne yarder.

EE: Lots of scrap.

RR: Yeah.

EE: How many ships did you work on? To go back to Port Ship for a few moments.

RR: The Port Ship is the *Dunn*, the *White*.

EE: The *Sir James Dunn*?

RR: Yeah, *Sir James Dunn*. The *M. White*. There was another one. I forget. Hull 109, 108, 109, 110, 111, and 112.

EE: This was the Hall Corp fleet?

RR: Yeah.

EE: And did you have any particular tasks? Any particular part of the ship you worked on?

RR: Well, I worked all parts. I worked in the punch shed for the first six months because they wouldn't train me on anything else. Punch shed, and then when I went out--.

EE: What's that? You--.

RR: A punch shed is where they made the sections of boat together and they lift them up and then hold it and welded them together as a part of the boat.

EE: Oh, they were punching the repaired pieces of steel in the shop.

[... *audio skips*]

RR: Together.

EE: Right.

RR: And I started out in the punch shed, and then from the punch shed, I went to the--. The punch shed to on the upper deck, and I did union melt. You know the heavy plates on the decks, about three-, four-inch plates? I did heavy plates with a union melt, with a German guy from Germany. And then I noticed in the scrapyards while I was hunting around the scrapyards, I found the very machines that I used being scrapped.

EE: Now what did you do up in repairing these?

RR: I didn't repair anything. I worked on the boats welding decks, and then welding the sections together, and even the overhead plates on the bottoms.

EE: It was always a matter of repairing.

RR: No, it wasn't in repairing. It was building at that time. It was all building.

EE: Okay.

RR: Building new ships.

EE: Oh, I see.

RR: These were all building new ships.

EE: This was the time when Port Ship was actually involved in--.

RR: Building ships.

EE: In ship construction.

RR: Yeah. Those hulls that I mentioned, the hull numbers.

[0:45:03]

EE: Right, yes. Oh, sorry. You were saying “hull.” H-U-L-L.

RR: Yeah. The hull numbers were actually 108, 109, 110, 111, 112.

EE: Right. I see. And you were involved with the building of all four of them then?

RR: Yeah, all four of them. Their total crew at that was, I guess, about 2,800-3,800. There was about 2,800 welders there.

EE: Wow.

RR: 2,800 welders.

EE: Working at Port Ship?

RR: Yeah.

EE: Brother! I hadn't realized how big an operation it used to be.

RR: Yeah, well, they had the main slip next to the water, and then they had one right on top beside it where they could slide the boat in. After it was partially complete, they'd slide it into the water slip, and then would back it out. Yeah. After it was completed. They just built part of it enough so it would float and *bang!* And then they would build up, build up from there.

EE: Right. And did they build the complete ship up here at the time?

RR: Yeah. Everything.

EE: I see.

RR: Started from the hull right to the stack.

EE: Right. Well, I've got some more reading to do because there is, I think, a history of Port Ship, is there? [... *audio skips*] Member of the union by that time?

RR: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EE: Steelworkers?

RR: Well, they were--. I can't remember what steel--. It was something. I can't remember.

EE: Boilermaker? No.

RR: All I know is it didn't--.

[Woman]: It was the boilermakers.

RR: No, it wasn't boilermakers. It had boilermakers there, but I was not with the boilermakers. Yeah, I was not qualified enough to belong to the boilermakers in the shipyards.

EE: Oh, really?

RR: Not at that time.

EE: Those were the elite workers, were they?

RR: Yeah. I became a boilermaker after, but then they didn't have any jobs for me.

EE: No. No, that would be the tough thing. Were you doing this work at the time that the Seaway was opened or--?

RR: The Seaway? I never worked on the Seaway.

EE: No, but in terms of the business that the Seaway brought up here, were you affected by the--?

RR: No.

EE: No. So you'd gone on to the work at Red Rock and--.

RR: Well, I worked mostly on boilers for the pulp and paper industry. Places like Espanola, Prince George, Prince Albert, BC, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Prince George, Lake View in Toronto. Another one I worked on was Court--.

EE: That's the generating plant in Lake View?

RR: And Courtright, and I worked in a Dow Chemical plant in Sarnia on their boilers. I worked in also a few chemical industries like Carbon Black.

EE: So this is the work that you did through your working life then?

RR: Yeah.

EE: You became a boilermaker and worked at--.

RR: Boilermaker and sheet metal. Carbon Black was all sheet metal work.

EE: Right. And you worked until retirement?

RR: Over here locally at the pulp mill.

EE: At what is now Abitibi Bowater.

RR: It was Avenor. It's now Abitibi Bowater.

EE: Right.

RR: You know, what I've been trying to analyze myself as to why they went down. The reason they went down, like, Avenor went down was they had guys that were 54, 55, 60, and they promoted them to management jobs, say, in the wood room. But these guys did not have the ability to recognize situational awareness, you know what I mean?

EE: Do expand on that.

RR: Yeah, like, the one guy got chopped up in waferboard, another guy got--. One guy had got chopped up in the waferboard plant, and I had to go there after the guy was--. The management of Great Lakes went in there with a torch and cut out materials so that they could take the person out that was cut up, and I had to go back and weld that stuff together. And the firemen, well, I can tell you how effective one guy. There was a guy who all these welders went around to maintenance, there's a guy with a firehose behind you or an extinguisher. And this guy, as soon as he went in there, he could smell the remains of the body in there. He got white as a ghost, and he just about barked, and he took off. Myself, I went to the door, took two or three breaths, put on a paper mask, and I said, "Well, I guess somebody's got to do the job. Might as well." So I went back, and I welded the thing back together so it could start operating.

EE: Gruesome enough.

RR: And there was--. I beg your pardon. There was another guy to the way situational awareness was like this. I was asked to do a job with a sheet metal mat, and we changed the pitch on a chute in the--. [... *audio skips*] Size was the same, but the outlet size, we changed it to steeper. To steeper. Now what happened was when it plugged up before, the guys used to go in there and just hang onto the side and jump on the stuff and get the bark to go through. Now when we changed the pitch, the bark would go through easier. So when a guy jumped on it, you got caught inside there, and there was nobody else around. He just left there two, three hours. He ended up inside the boiler house parts of the main boiler house. You know what I mean? And the situational awareness is they should have warned those guys on the following shift—all the guys who might have something to do with keeping that bark going through—that this has changed. They never did that. They had no situational awareness.

[0:50:11]

EE: So this means that occupational health and safety just wasn't being provided for properly.

RR: Well, they were doing it as much as they can. They're giving this a lot of talk, you know what I mean? Yap, yap, yap, yap, yap. Hours and hours of talking about safety, but you don't know about it at the time unless you watch these guys working. How they do their work, you can't--. [... *audio skips*] Management on the part of situational awareness. They didn't have that ability.

EE: Yes.

RR: To be able to recognize situational awareness. Like the guy with that chute, if they'd have warned the guys ahead of time, that wouldn't have happened.

EE: No. No, quite. Yeah, if the way in which the thing works and the stuff moves is changed, you--.

RR: I got slammed myself with a log inside there. And what it was was the west deck was a fairly upper deck, and the [huff] operator could see the logs going in, see what pile wasn't too high, and if stuff was moving at the end. It wasn't moving, he'd stop and blow his horn or tap a button, and they'd get their operating crew inside to correct the situation. But on the east deck, it was about 670, almost 600 feet long. So they took—for some reason or other—the management in there decided, “Well, we haven't got deck operators, watchers, and operators on the west deck. Why do we need them on the east?” So they took them off. Wood was flying all over the floor. Like the wood was being fed into the drum and it would take anymore, and coming out, it was coming out a cord at a time. A bunch flying out. And those cord bunches flying out, and the end of one of the logs that hit me. And they figured it just hit me through the side of conveyor belt. That's not what happened.

One of the logs went up in the air, hit the side of the chute, and it looked like a kid. The log coming towards me looked like a kid on a skateboard down the edge of that chute, and it hit the edge of the platform, the width, and the top end of that log just drove me off of the platform I was standing on. There was a guy standing in front of me—guy with a red head and shirt—I gave him a push. There was rail in there. I gave him a push against the rail. He got swiped on the back, but I got thrown 20 feet in between a bunch of motors and ducts and everything. I suffered a concussion there. And then the worst part about all of that was that when I went to the hospital because I wasn't bleeding or anything all over the place, they weren't showing cuts. And on the way home, and they said, “Well, take it easy.” You know what I mean? They figured I was a drunk. Well, I wasn't drunk. I was still suffering from a concussion. My ligaments were all torn in my neck in one side.

EE: Sure. You were driving your vehicle?

RR: Yeah. I was driving home.

EE: Yeah. No one was taking care of you. You take care of yourself.

RR: No.

EE: That was near the end of your employment then?

RR: I never went back after that.

EE: Never went back?

RR: I never went back.

EE: Well, it's a damn near thing you weren't killed, if I may say that.

RR: Well, I was lucky to be alive.

EE: Yes.

RR: At that time because I figured if it ripped all my ligaments out, my thyroid went, and then when they tried to fix my thyroid, the doctor dropped the pill on this lip, and it left a scar. I ended up with cancer on this lip. It took about three or four months to clear that up.

EE: Yes. And you've been retired since then?

RR: I haven't done anything else. The only thing that I know when I retired was the company paid me X number of dollars a month, and then the--.

EE: This was Avenor?

RR: No, not the Avenor. The pension plan, RVXI. They paid me so much a month, and then on to of that was the taxes \$1,375. Now I noticed the last few years, they've been reducing. They still pay the same amount per month, but they're reducing the amount of taxes they're paying. And now the tax company is complaining I have to take money out of taxes. You know what I mean? The money I'm getting to pay taxes. You understand what I mean?

EE: Yeah.

RR: I don't know if they can reduce that amount. They've actually reduced that amount of taxes because after a certain period of time, I don't know what the policy is, eh?

EE: No, I don't either.

RR: But when I belonged to the union, I asked the union to proofread every word of the contract and every phrase of it. You know what I mean?

EE: Sure.

RR: Spent money to proofread it.

EE: This was the boilermakers union?

RR: No, no. Canadian Paperworkers, local 39.

EE: CPU.

RR: I asked them to proofread every word of the contract, and that was why. These things. Because they're skittling back on the amount. Now what happens, the next stage is I'm going to say to the--. [... *audio skips*] Automatically reduce the amount I get in pension.

EE: Sure, sure.

RR: You know what I mean?

EE: Right.

RR: Whereas before, they were actually paying a certain amount.

EE: Yes.

RR: You see what I mean? Now they're doing--. They're skating back.

EE: Sure. Yes. Well, this has been a very interesting scan of your life in all kinds of places, and those parts of it that were related to the grain trade.

[0:55:03]

RR: Yeah. The other thing was I stopped and thought about it after. I ran into a guy, Herb Carrol, here, from one of them parts of my job like this. And there was no work around here, but he says, "Ok. We can get you a job. With your qualifications, we can get you a job in Sarnia." That's when I got to work at [Courtright] when I went out there. My wife went with me, eh? And they give me a travel grant, you know what I mean?

EE: Sure.

RR: And so much money each month to help us settle there, to get settled there, because you had to rent a place to stay, and you had to pay your travel expenses, and all this kind of stuff. All these places that I worked I should have had a good tax lawyer with me to reduce the amount of my travel expenses because I was learning all the time too. I went to these jobs in order extend my experience in that particular line of work.

EE: Right.

RR: You know what I mean?

EE: Yes.

RR: Different standards.

EE: Yes, right.

RR: That was the sole purpose of, say, going from--.

EE: When did you retired, if I may ask?

RR: Retired, actually, it had to be shortly after that accident. The accident occurred in November and the 27th, and I was supposed to legally retired in April of 1997. But this was a year before.

EE: So this was the full 65 years that you were working?

RR: Yeah.

EE: Yeah, '32, '60, '97.

[Woman]: No, he was 64 at the time.

EE: Yeah. Just a little bit earlier.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Yes. And--.

RR: Because I got slammed with the log.

EE: Yes, of course.

RR: And I had this angiogram that supposedly gave me a stroke. And the reason I got the angiogram was I was looking at it later, and looking at it, it looks like this. When you have an angiogram, they check your blood. First thing they check your blood. "You have high LLs and high LDLs in the blood." Stabilization before and after the procedure. They sent me to Sarnia. They never checked for high LLs or LDLs. They did the angiogram, and as soon as I got ack, I had a stroke. Bang! That was on top of the concussion a year earlier. You know what I mean? So I don't know what I'm left with, what kind of head.

EE: Yes. Well, I was asking about the date just to put it in context in my own mind because the income tax laws of the country, of course, provided breaks in terms of travelling to a job and so on. And you got those, I hope?

RR: No. None. I never got any.

[Woman]: What do you mean? Any tax breaks?

RR: No. I got no tax breaks at all.

[Woman]: You got travel allowance a couple of times.

RR: Just a couple times with the union. The boilermakers and the company I worked for, like, the only one that paid me travel allowance was Horton Steel for Howard Pearl. Whenever I got--. Like, I left Winnipeg, and I went to work out east with him. Right away, travel allowance.

EE: Sure.

RR: I got three days' pay.

EE: No, my understanding was that if you were moving to a job, that there was a break, that you could deduct the cost from your income, but of course, that would have to be for each year that you were doing it.

RR: Yeah. Deduct the cost of my income. Whatever I had earned before, a lot of times--. I quit the boilermakers and all that, international, because for a simple reason. When I went between jobs, in between jobs I got so broke that I couldn't even get welfare sometimes because it was hard to even get welfare.

EE: Right. And your membership in the union would lapse, I suppose, as well, would it?

RR: Yeah. Well, you'd lapse at the local.

EE: Yes. Yeah.

RR: Yeah, because you got no money to pay anything. You can't pay dues. You can't pay for food and for a cup of coffee.

EE: Yeah. It's grim.

RR: Yeah, you're not going to--.

EE: Yeah, no questions about it. Well, I'm wondering--. We have a variety of questions for people who worked in the elevators or whatever. I might take a look at some of these.

RR: I'll see what I can do.

EE: Sure. What would you like people to know about the work that you did and the places you worked? Maybe the--.

RR: Well, the places that I worked and the things that I did, actually, was to improve the safety for the employees that were there. That's the thing that I would like to pass on.

EE: Yes. Were you on union committees or union management committees for that?

RR: No, no.

EE: It was your own initiative then?

RR: Yeah. My own initiative, yeah.

EE: Right. Safety has been emphasized by various people we've interviewed. The poor guys who do the work become very keenly aware.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Our first interview was with Roy Lamore, who you may know from the Legion Branch Five in Port Arthur. He worked on the railway, and he had gruesome stories about accidents that happened.

RR: On the railway, eh?

EE: His memory years later is the importance of safety on the job. You've got the same kind of sense here.

RR: Yeah. Well, I worked on the railroad with--. I worked the railroad too. The extra gang. Does it still work?

[1:00:04]

[Woman]: Yeah.

RR: The extra gang.

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: And while I was working out west in Alberta around that area—you know what I mean, Brant work and that—I took a job with the railway. They were rebuilding the line between Lethbridge and Edmonton.

EE: Ok. The north-south line.

RR: And we were on the extra gang changing the track from letter gauges to a heavier gauge.

EE: Sure. An extra gang would be a group of men hired for this job? They weren't the regular maintenance, right?

RR: Just that one contract, yeah. Regular. They have a whole bunch of cars, and that was their bunkhouses and the tool sheds and everything. Their cookhouse and what have you. So while we were working there, the guys would knock over the rail on one side, and I happened to get--. My job was to put plugs in the holes and pound them down, you know what I mean? In the old spike holes.

EE: In the ties?

RR: Yeah. And while they were pushing the outside rail down over the embankment, I happened to get my foot beside it, and it got my right foot underneath. It just squished my arch of my foot down to nothing. So the whole crew got in there when they saw my foot underneath that. About 20 or 30 men got in there, and I don't know how in the hell they lifted that rail. But they lifted the rail up enough that I could--. With bars and stuff like that, it must have been over 200 of them. Lifted the bar up, and they got the thing out so I could get my foot out. And half these guys couldn't even speak the English language. They were all extra gang, you know what I mean?

EE: Yeah. They could see the problem.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Yeah.

[Woman]: That's where extra adrenaline comes in.

EE: Oh, yes. It does indeed. Were these Italian workers by any chance, would you say?

RR: No, no. I'd say most of them were Polish.

[Woman]: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Ok.

EE: Eastern Europe.

RR: Polish, German, Ukrainian.

[Woman]: Immigrants.

EE: Displaced persons perhaps, but immigrants. Yeah.

[Woman]: Immigrants.

RR: Yeah. Yeah. All immigrants, yeah.

EE: What might surprise, interest people most about the work you did? Close to the grain trade maybe. [Laughs] Getting that dust control equipment perhaps, or at Port Ship. Any interesting or surprising things about the work you did?

RR: The work that I did was everybody figures--. They look, watch somebody else doing it, and they figure it's easy. It isn't. You have to know the materials that you're working with. You have to know the metallurgy that's involved, the shrinkage, expansion, especially on steel—bio steels, carbon steels. Shrinkage and expansion because the method of welding is--. If you go by the engineering standards of how it's welded, and you follow it, you generally won't run into problems. But if you follow the engineering standards that are designed for that type of welding? No problem. The end product generally ends up.

EE: And this was the ICS courses were designed to teach you those things?

RR: Yeah. They were designed, yeah. They taught you metallurgy of the material, expansion, contraction of the material.

EE: How many different kinds of welding did you actually learn? You were referring to them earlier.

[Woman]: Oh, heck. You had pipe, pressure vessel.

RR: Unfired pressure vessel, fired pressure vessel, inland lake shipping code. CWB, which is millwrighting, like paper mills, you know what I mean? It's structural. It's actually structural.

EE: What does the CWB stand for? Because the--.

RR: Canadian Bureau of Standard. CBS.

EE: Oh, CBS. Because if I'm a farmer here, I hear you say Canadian Wheat Board, but it isn't. [Laughs]

RR: If you notice on the welding electrodes, they have two numbers. They have AWS, American Welding Society, which is their metallurgical number. And the CBS has their own separate number for that.

EE: Right.

RR: Canadian Bureau of Standards. That's the tone number on that.

[Woman]: What you might not know is out of 2,500 people that applied to do a job in Courtright for Ontario Hydro, he was one that was sent that had the paper, equipment, and everything. And there where they do the pressure vessels, they x-ray every weld. And if you got a crack in it, you're gone.

EE: Yeah. Yeah, well, I was thinking pressure vessel, this is really when you've got tanks that are going to hold material—air whatever it is—gas that's under pressure.

RR: Or high pressure. Just to give you an idea of the size of those things at Courtright, the main pipe going from the top of the boiler down to the turbines were made in Russia. Of course, the hole in the middle was eight inches, and the outside of the pipe or barrel if you want to call it was 24. So you can imagine how thick a wall that was. An eight-inch wall.

EE: Right. Well, that's right. Of course.

RR: You can imagine what that was like. That was just one incident there.

EE: And you were welding these?

RR: Well, I didn't particularly like it.

EE: No.

RR: They got me to fill in, you know what I mean? To fill in when a couple of the guys couldn't make it. I would fill in, but I didn't particularly like it.

[1:05:09]

[Woman]: You were there six months.

RR: They had the high frequency induction generators there that were about the size of this house, half the size of this house, just to keep those pipes at the proper temperature while it was being welded. You know what I mean, high frequency?

EE: Yeah.

[Woman]: They he was on the pipeline, the DEW Line, from the Yukon.

RR: I was on the DEW Line. Oh, the DEW Line. That's really interesting. On the DEW Line, I was on just below King William Island, and while I was working on that thing was a--. First of all, there was just an airport marked out with a bunch of barrels that they used as flares. So the airplane lands about 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. It was daylight. It lands, and after we get out, it takes off. And when we go in there, we go into the thing, and there's a hole in the ground, and it goes into a Quonset hut below 12, 15 feet of snow. So we stay in that Quonset hut for about three weeks, and three weeks later, the snow is gone. Then four weeks. It takes about five weeks. The snow is all gone. Then after that, we got no drinking water, and they guys were out there making booze out the apple juice and stuff that was there. And here I am doing welding, and I have to drink about a gallon or half a gallon or water a day, and there was nothing. [... *audio skips*] I was doing. And I was dehydrated from lack of water.

EE: And you're still busy trying to weld as best you can. [Laughing]

RR: Yeah. Yeah. So I built their tank there. But the idea was that they built the radar tower and protective hut, and then they built a tank to keep the diesel engine going all the winter so the guys wouldn't have to go out and roll barrels in the snow and dump up to the Quonset hut and pour it into a hole in the ground. You know what I mean?

EE: Yes.

RR: Into a reserve tank for the diesel. Because what they had was they had a diesel motor—a diesel electric motor—and they had electric rads inside. Plus circulation of the water from the radiator was keeping the Quonset hut warm.

EE: This is one of the distant early warning stations that you were involved in completing?

RR: Yeah, yeah. The thing that I noticed there after the snow melted and I was walking around within a mile of the site was I found a patch on the ground like this, you know, about the size of a car garage, and I could see a bunch of-- [*.. audio skips*] Attached on canvas. So I looked, and I followed it around. While I was looking, there was a skull there, a human skull.

EE: Oh, yes.

RR: And I also saw high heeled boots, and I looked at the boots very closely, and there was oak tacks, you know, holding the leather together. So I said-- So I read a little bit about that, and I realized that would have belonged to the Tars. That was English sailors. You know the Franklin expedition? They were there. And because they said above the hill, the one side, the Eskimos had marked out a thing, and there was it looked like a grave down there, but you could see about a foot below the surface in the summertime. After all the snow was gone, the ground was still that cold. It looked like a block of ice. You could wipe the ice, and you could see a skeleton in there. Like a body.

EE: Yes.

RR: And what it was was those guys from the Franklin expedition were trying to come down Hudson Bay. [*... audio skips*] I mean, they were above the Eskimos.

EE: Too proud to learn the way to survive. Right. Well, one more-- [Laughing]

RR: That's number two.

EE: Incredible experience. Yes. Yes. Well, I don't know.

RR: My name is still on that tank up there if they haven't ripped it down already.

EE: Oh, good!

RR: My idea is what they've done is they probably used a tractor and tried to move it. If they did that, they ripped out the bottom.

EE: I see.

RR: Because there's a sump at the bottom that sticks out about a foot, and you can't just drag it on the ground. You've got to jack it up in the air about a foot and put runners underneath it to move it around.

EE: Right. Well, it may still be there polluting the arctic, I suppose, or would it not pollute?

RR: Yeah, well. My name, I wrote it on the inside ring.

EE: I see.

RR: On the inside I wrote my name, R. D. Ross.

EE: Right. Right. Well, I think we've probably, from our perspective—you know, Voices of the Grain Trade—I think you've probably given us what you're able to give us, and you've given me, at least—I don't know how my good colleague here, the technical expert has been enjoying this—but you've--. [... *audio skips*] And so on and so forth and getting to know Joe Clark many years later when he was Minister of External Affairs.

RR: Well, I never talked to Joe Clark since then. The only time I ever shook hands with him was there when he was riding horseback.

EE: Right. Yeah, well, I won't get into telling stories, but--.

[1:10:02]

OM: I'll remember Sam.

RR: Eh?

OM: I'll remember Sam. [Laughing]

RR: Sam, the donkey! [Laughing] Yeah, well, I remember Sam. Yeah. Well, you have to talk to Pattison about that. He says, "Do you remember Sam?" Ask him about if he ever remembers Sam.

EE: Well, it's been very, very interesting, and I appreciate your letting us into your home this afternoon and giving us particularly that vivid account of the explosion. And then, interestingly enough, your work years later, some years later, in trying to reduce the risk of that at some other elevators.

RR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there was quite a bit of work in that trying to avoid--.

EE: I'm sure.

RR: Yeah.

EE: Right. Well, thank you very much again, Richard.

RR: Yeah.

EE: It's been a pleasure to listen to you.

RR: Yeah, same to you. I've always wanted to meet a guy who was a politician anyway. [Laughing] What office were you in? Provincial or federal?

EE: I was in--.

End of interview.