

**Narrator:** Bill Skrepichuk (BS)

**Company Affiliations:** N/A

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**Summary:** In his second interview, retired engineer and local historian Bill Skrepichuk expands on his family’s connection to the grain trade in Thunder Bay and on the Prairies. First, he discusses how both sides of his family immigrated to Canada—his mother’s side to a grain farm in Saskatchewan, and his father’s side to Thunder Bay and into elevator work. He recounts how his father joined John Andrews at the new Northland Machinery sheet metal company, doing work at the elevators with dust control and equipment upgrades. He describes John Andrews’ community commitments, the company being sold, and satellite offices in Vancouver. He also describes the dangerous work conditions for sheet metal workers, and the hard manual labour they performed before electric tools. Skrepichuk recalls summers assisting his mother’s family in Saskatchewan with the grain harvest, and how these experiences enriched his knowledge of Thunder Bay’s industry. He ends the interview by describing his and his father’s memories of the demolition of CPR Elevator D and Pool 6.

**Keywords:** Local history; Thunder Bay history; Prairie Provinces history; Terminal elevators—Thunder Bay; Grain farmers/producers; Immigrant workers; Northland Machinery; Sheet metal work; Trades work; Skilled trades; John Andrews; Grain elevators—Equipment and supplies; Dust control; Health & safety; Farming—equipment and supplies; Grain elevator demolition; MPE Pool 2; SWP Pool 6; Pool 6 demolition; CPR Elevator D; CPR D demolition; CPR Elevator A; CPR Elevator B; Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR); Canadian National Railway (CNR)

Time, Speaker, Narrative
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<p>NP: Hi, this is Nancy Perozzo. I’m doing a second interview with Bill Skrepichuk at his home on McGregor Avenue in Thunder Bay. The date is January 12, 2024. Today’s session we are going to be starting with looking at some of the family connections that Bill has to the grain industry, and because those family connections overlap with a fellow by the name of John Andrews—who is quite prominent in the grain industry in Thunder Bay—he will also make comments related to his memories, usually via his father, about Mr. Andrews. Okay, Bill. Over to you.</p>
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BS: Very good. Okay. Well, thanks for the opportunity to tell a few family stories and also to talk about Mr. Andrews. A very honourable man and a great industrialist for our area. So backing up and talking about my family history, my grandfather Vasyly Antoniow came to this country a couple of times, actually, in the early 1900s and then again in the mid 1920s and eventually got a job working for the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] in 1928 at a section called McMorran. This is in southwest Saskatchewan near the Eston, Saskatchewan area. That's just west of Rosetown.

He became a section man there, and one of the opportunities for working on the railroad at the time was you could bring your family over from Europe, and they would give you a quarter section of land. This is very similar to the story of many, many hundreds of people who came from Europe as noble, honest workers and occupiers of the land. CPR was giving out quarter sections. Now, in 1929, as a result of that, my mother and her siblings—two other sisters and a brother—came and were brought over, passage paid. Came in through Quebec City and across on the CPR into Saskatchewan, were picked up, as I understand, from Moosejaw in an old buggy and eventually got to McMorran, Saskatchewan.

My father--. My grandfather, sorry, working on the section wintertime, summertime, eventually became ill and came down with tuberculosis, and in 1930 in June, he passed away. So they had just come to the country and were living out in the Prairies—this is bald prairie out there for sure—and with this quarter section of land that needed to be broken and worked and stones removed and all the things associated with that. So the grain was obviously the reason they were here. If my grandmother would have had her way, she would have taken everybody back to Europe at the time, but what had happened is there was an insurance policy for a year, I guess, that had just expired, and therefore, they were stuck. They had to stay on the land and make the best of it.

So as a result of that, my mother, who was the eldest—she was, what, 10 or 11 at the time—she pitched right in, was expected to work like a man right from the beginning. And even though going to school, instead of going to school two or three miles on the horse, back and forth everyday, et cetera, it was necessary, but working on the land was the key thing. So the grain crops back in the '30s were, after breaking and putting—obviously neighbours helped—were very, very bountiful for the first couple of years until the dust bowl hit and the Dirty Thirties kicked in and grain became very, very hard to make a crop out of these things. But they had to build--.

My mother remembers the threshing gangs and cooking for the threshing people and stooking, of course, stooking for drying, et cetera, having to build a granary by herself to house this grain. All this kind of stuff. So grain is definitely in the family blood from the perspective of sustenance and sustaining the families.

**[0:05:10]**

After 1929 until 1939, my mother persisted on the land, obviously with her siblings and my uncle, but all being younger, she was expected to do the lion's share of the work, and she did. But then my grandmother took sick and died, again, after 10 years, and so therefore, it was left nobody on the land or no family on the land, no connections. So it turned out she moved into a town, just abandoned the land at this--. Actually, rented the land out and eventually came to the city, Saskatoon, Rosetown first and then Saskatoon. Then when the war was on, came to Thunder Bay as Rosy the Riveter here for Can Car, and then on and on it goes, and met my father. I guess it was '46.

And now, my father come from Ukraine. The other family, my mother's family, came from southeastern Poland, Carpathia. It was Galicia at the time for sure. My father, who actually was following, previously, his father--. My grandfather and his brothers had come here in the early 1900s and had worked and were trapped by the First World War, and eventually they helped build things here at the time—the Jackknife Bridge, various other things. Trapped by the war and eventually went back after the war. My father was sent in 1929 to come to Thunder Bay, and came in the spring to Thunder Bay, here. Coincidentally, my mother actually, unbeknownst, had come '29 to Saskatchewan.

However, my father worked various jobs all through--. Labour jobs. He came at--. He was 19 years old, so therefore strong and agile and worked all kinds of jobs, and eventually ended up in the grain elevators in what they call Pool 2, at the time, as kind of just a labourer. Eventually worked up to being very noticed by his hard work, and noticed by a gentleman named John Andrews, who was working for Western Grain, I guess, at the time, and was in the grain sampling and weighing department there. At one point, John Andrews came to my father in 1938, '37-'38, and said, "Peter, I'm thinking of making a new company. I want you to come with me."

Not having any real trade qualifications, my father just said, "Yes, for sure." So off he went with John Andrews. My father had been working for the Day Company, actually, at the time, and he went with John Andrews right from the beginning, and he recognized--. They both recognized each other as good, honest men, hard working. Obviously, John's business side, and my father just installation, amongst other guys. And a company flourished through the Second World War. The primary industry had to maintain construction and runability [sic] through there, so worked all the way through the wartime era.

And again, these people were involved in Northland Machinery, the company that John formed. They were involved with custom fitting of sheet metal workings and grain handling conveyors and systems, which eventually came into the dust collection system in the beginning of the 1960s, et cetera. So my father talked a lot about that, eating--. Obviously, when you're in the grain industry, you eat a lot of dust, and you have to work in a lot of cold weather. And especially if you're working outside, you're working a lot

of high angles in the wintertime and all the rest of that stuff. So that was common outdoor work, and he went to it naturally. He was a spry and, well, middle-aged man at that time, but spry and willing to work and known by his willingness to work.

Along with other contemporaries at the time, there would have been people like Joe Trimble and Bill Gillespie. There would have been Jim Piatt. There would have been guys like Swan Anderson and Dan Blaze. There would have been Dutchie. They called him Hank. I can't remember his name. Dutchie was his name. He was a good layout man, my dad said. And then there was an old foreman named Pearson, a supervisor who wanted my dad to--. When Pearson was retiring, he wanted my dad to take over as a kind of a foreman on these jobs, but my father said, "I prefer just to work it out." He says, "I can be more valuable to you working than as a foreman."

**[0:10:38]**

Again, that opportunity working with John Andrews because he was known to have a deep social conscience. Honest, good, hardworking man. Obviously, he was in the business side. His brother was Charlie Andrews, who was more in the operations side, and my dad got along well with each one of these guys. There was great--. The social bonding example. For example, at Christmas, the parties for the kids, I remember those. There was always a union party, but there was always a Northland party, and that was really quite something to look forward to, especially when you're young. Everybody would get turkeys. John Andrews would give out turkeys for Christmastime too to the employees. Again, touchstones to build a good spirit of the company.

Even the scholarships going forward. As John progressed and his business flourished, scholarships were given out, as a matter of fact, for worthy achievement and achievable students. As a matter of fact, my sister was a recipient of the 1965. She was quite proud of that. My dad proud of it too because she was academically inclined—not like her brother—more so. But nevertheless, my dad was even kind of anxious to apply for it, but once he applied for it and she won it, he was very, very proud of that achievement. Again, it was a noble company that wanted to build a strong, local presence, and obviously there was a lot of the industry here. They were known for good, honest work. Maybe competition might have been thinner, et cetera, but nevertheless, they put in their time.

Testament of a guy called Joey Bamford, who has passed away now, but Joe and my dad used to work together. He was an apprentice under my father, and he said--. I talked with him a lot. He talked about my dad not being afraid of heights, and he had powerful hands. He was not a big man, but he had powerful hands and could almost cut quarter-plate, iron plate by hand type of thing, eh? Punching. Again, wintertime work, and Joe Bamford and my dad on the outside of a spout, dangling from the ladder at 90 feet above the ground. Joe on the inside with a dolly. This is the type of work that was done. It was what had to be done at the time, so that's the story of Johnny Andrews, Northland Machinery, and the workers associated with that.

So yeah, to continue on, I guess you could argue my father survived that—not survived—but survived and thrived, I'll put it that way, from the late 1930s right through to even the 1960s, retired, and then went back. The company had already been sold, but he went back, and he said, "All I want to do is work. I need something to do." They wanted to pay him too much money. He said, "I don't need the money." [Laughs] Well, he'd take the money, but it was mostly the work that intrigued him or was his forte in life.

NP: Who was the company sold to?

PW: Westeel--. No, not Westeel Rosco. I think it was--. Oh. Oh, the name is--. Not Bisco. No, these were just--. Oh.

NP: It's not that important.

PW: Zadi. I think Zadi Sheet Metal was one of the companies that eventually took it over. The legacy after Northland I should know. I don't have it instantly here for you.

NP: No, that's easy enough to find out. Was it sold because business decreased, or was it sold because Mr. Andrews was no longer heading up the company?

**[0:15:04]**

PW: No. I think that they had a number of products that they were working with. They had a belting line that came in because that would have been conveying, belt conveying, in the dust handling system. They had a line on various dust cleaners, and I don't believe it would have been sold due to John Andrews exiting the business. I think Charlie Andrews was who the company went to after that, and maybe it was the result of them aging out of the system probably. As a result of that, this would have been a viable company with a number of good product lines and was quickly usurped by the other industries.

And to a point, I guess you could say that the early sheet metal work and construction was already passed. And to be honest, that work required a lot of custom-made parts because the drawings, the ability to draw the mechanical internals and the fits of various chutes and things like that, it had to be all rather custom made. So it was all feel-fit versus the elevator itself—the construction of the monolith—that would have been a large contract, single purpose, but the refit side would have been custom. Let me say it that way. So there were others that filled in the blanks and possibly came from Vancouver, the West Coast. There was a lot of crossing between the West Coast and Winnipeg and Thunder Bay with the grain industry of mechanical people who could do work.

NP: Speaking of that, that would have been the time when they started doing the major buildings out on the West Coast. So was Northland Machinery involved because of their expertise developed here in Thunder Bay?

BS: Short answer, yes. They did have a Vancouver office for a while. They also had, apparently, in Winnipeg too, as I understand. I must admit that's a good segue to my work. We'll go backwards with me because, again, as I mentioned previously in 1980, which is a little bit further down the road, I was out working with H. A. Simons in consulting in Vancouver in material handling for a number of years. One of my job assignments was at United Grain Growers [UGG] as an upgrade to United Grain Growers' conveying handling systems where, in fact, we put in what I think they call the Buehler systems. These were different types of methods for handling and transferring grain—upgrades and modernizations. Things like that.

But you're right. Northland did try to presence there, but because they weren't large, they didn't have a large footprint. They would have been not as competitive on large jobs. Small jobs, they could have been competitive, but again, to get plant and people to be able to work would have been not--. Well, it would have been a bit of a struggle maybe is one way to put it. In Vancouver, there was a number of places like even the Can Car operation out there as well as Ayco on the north shore. They were well known in the industry. Then there was also competition from Seattle, at the time, too, in the consultant industry, too, that way.

NP: Did your dad have any favourite stories that he liked to tell about his time hanging off the edge of the elevators and--?

BS: Well, he didn't--. Not that I can remember as much as what other people tell me stories of him.

NP: Okay.

BS: Because he tended to be a little more on the modest side. I'll tell you, every time I pick up his sheet metal toolbox, I struggle. These are boxes that they made themselves and had belting as a handle and all this stuff. But what these guys had to carry around was meaningful. This was not a job for complaining, people who preferred to complain rather than to work. That's one way to put it—an honest way to put it. But no, he didn't--. I recognize some of the materials, bit, like lag bolts and things like that, that happened to be in his box. Small bits and pieces of things that I say, "Huh!"

**[0:20:19]**

Star drills to be able to drill into concrete. Not--. And this is all by hand where they would rotate a star drill 90 degrees every hit to drill a hole to put a lead anchor to hammer that in so they could put a lag bolt off of some bracket that was hanging onto this pipe, you know, 50 feet from the ground. That pipe was going to be a leg that would be supplying grain to the boats and things like that.

And dust collection systems too. The major pieces on top were one thing, these air handling systems, but the duct work is nondescript how it had to come out to the side of the elevators and go through walls. It definitely was an appendage out the side of the elevator because inside, the elevator was plugged with other mechanical equipment, and the dust collection was large diameters so that the volumes of air would be minimized. And then for sure the big cyclones expanded to shrink the velocity to knock the dust out, and away it would go.

And again, this is not a--. [Laughs] The dust was a factor, and the dust was a factor in all of the grain handling areas. The dust that was isn't the dust that is there now. The dust before was prolific. I mean, dust was a necessary evil to handle the grain. Now they use it as a product where they can make pellets out of and sell. But it's a long trail being a nuisance, a liability, to an asset, to put it that way.

NP: I have a question, or just a clarification. When you were talking about that--. I think you said the term that it was by hand. Some people listening to this in 2024 would think, "Oh, you've got an electric drill. It's used by hand." But I don't even think that's what you're talking about.

BS: No. No electrics. Nothing.

NP: You're talking about the hand crank.

BS: Typically a--. No, the hand cranks would have been more or less for making seams, what they call Pittsburgh locks, on sheet metal where you join, and there's a pleat that you make and a groove, and then you seam that together as a strength. Then there would be all hand rivets. So the hand rivets would have been--. Again, this isn't a pop rivet, but this is one guy with a dolly, a metal heavy dolly, on the inside, and a guy with a peening hammer on the outside. You'd pop your rivet through, and you'd set it with a set, and then you'd hammer to make round. You'd cone it, and then hammer it to make good, and that's the method of attachment.

NP: So how would this drill work that you're talking about? The drill that was drilling into the concrete.

BS: Oh, yeah. Because the drill that's turned by hand, it's a long--. A star drill is something, say, a foot long. I probably have one. I have one around here, but anyway, it doesn't matter because I have it for my rock quarry. But the star drill, it had kind of like a diamond edge or a carbonite edge on it that it was kind of a star, and then you would start smashing the end with a hammer into the concrete wall that you're trying to fasten to. So you have to penetrate probably in about three, two and a half inches anyway, and the diameter. So you start with a small one, then you go to a bigger one. And it's all manual, and it's all arm-strong engine—your arm. [Laughs]

Then you set a lead anchor system in there with a wedge and a plug, and then you tap that up such that it expands and makes good. It's a wedge. Then you thread in a bolt. Not a bolt, but a screw, basically, a thick, big screw to be able to set in to hold fast. So everything is all by hand, again. And you better make sure you have all your tools with you because going up and down was a factor. So you made sure that every time you went up there, you had enough of your tools. You had one of these metal boxes up there too hanging with you. So you bring everything you need.

NP: And is he--. How is he suspended?

BS: On ropes and a chair.

**[0:25:02]**

NP: Like a bosun chair?

BS: Bosun chair, yeah. Yeah. Off the side, there would have been a, well, pulley system, of course. And I don't know if would have been an air-tugger. Maybe a cap--. Yeah, they probably would have had a capstan system.

NP: What's that?

BS: Capstan is a rotating cone, I guess you could say, and it would have been with air rather than electrical. And so, it is an air motor, and this thing air motors a gear, and it rotates this shaft like on a sailboat, a winch on a sailboat. So you make good with a couple of wraps on the rope and up you go. [Laughs] You trust the guy below that it's going to work. So in fact, yeah, this was before a lot of the other things about scaffolding and safety. It's not as if it was an unsafe thing. These people who worked before knew somewhat the rules. You get hurt, you come home, you don't get paid. That's the old--. Not the old. That was the way the country was built. I can show you images here if you want about how guys in my quarry would do with nothing other than their wits about them.

And it wasn't forced labour. This was you were responsible for making sure that the rope was in good shape and the endings were proper. You never put a saddle on a dead horse. I don't know if you've ever heard that one.

NP: No.



BS: [Laughs] So what that is--. When you make an end around the clevis, there's a clamp and a shoe and two bolts and two nuts. So you make sure that that shoe is never on the dead end, the loose end, or the short end. You make sure that the saddle--.

NP: Of the rope?

BS: Saddle of the holder is on the main rope line.

NP: Yes.

BS: And then you tight the bolts because, as they say, you never put a saddle on a dead horse.

NP: Okay. The unfortunate thing about a lot of this is that because of the age of the equipment and because of my lack of knowledge—I have no idea what you're talking about—but to have you say that on tape, and then to marry that to a picture or to information about the equipment that you're talking about, then it makes sense.

BS: Absolutely. Of course.

NP: But it's important to have it recorded in any case.

BS: So what I bring up here is a picture of the elevators along the Kam River. [*Note: referring to a picture on his computer, from the Thunder Bay Museum. NP*] This is Elevator, let me see, A, that's B, and this is C. These were wooden monoliths. These were like 10-storey high buildings that were all along the Kam River, and that was--. These were eventually even taken down or burnt down, and these were steam plants. There was no dust collection systems on any of these elevators, et cetera, because the idea was get the grain there, get it through them, and--. Here's your consorts. That boat is a consort to that steamer, for example, and that boat is a consort to that. So this is how it was transported. This is the early 1900s.

This happens to be—this coal chute, et cetera—the old fort would have been right here, and the stone building would have been right here in this Kam River image here. So this was the state of affairs built in the late 1880s and working until about 1910 or so in the wooden elevators. Again, that was an early, early era. And then Elevator D, which is out of this picture here, eventually becomes a--. And again, this is how it was constructed. Look at the manpower and all the rest of that stuff here. This is from the Island. [*Possibly 977.113.303*]

NP: Can you go back to the previous one?

BS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Or this one here?

NP: 978. *[Reference to catalogue number at TBHM]*

BS: Yeah. Okay. Same.

NP: There.

BS: Oh, you want the working one. Okay. Go ahead.

NP: The 978. Yes. Because I just want to have a reference to these because they're at the Museum, correct?

BS: Yeah.

NP: And is that 978.41.2?

BS: Correct. Yeah. That's the construction of Elevator B. So in fact, that B and A is shown here. Some of the early images we have of Thunder Bay is from Cook standing on the top of that elevator shooting out the Kam River and also back towards us. I can show you the reverse angle shot of this too. Because the--.

NP: Cook being the photographer?

**[0:30:02]**

BS: Cook the photographer. Because once you have a tall building, I mean, the photographers realize, "Hey, this is--. I can do stuff with this." And that's what happened. That's why we do have a lot of long images here of Fort William and Port Arthur too for sure. They had the hill. We didn't, so therefore--. As you can see on the sign, that was also a grain storage shed that was appended to A, but that's the reason why they had to make this Elevator B. Kam River being here. We're looking out east this way. All of that is--. I mean, we could talk for a long time on this. I won't.

That again is from the Island looking across back at it. You can see already construction upcoming like that, eh? So it's--. We have some very good--. And this is kind of a general arrangement looking back east going that way now. This again is A, this is B, and that's C Elevator here. They did that just to confuse. Okay. So I don't know like--. Go ahead.

NP: So before we get off track or onto another track, your dad--.

BS: Yes.

NP: Anything else to add to his story?

BS: Well, other than that grain industry and Northland Machinery and sheet metal industry provided, I mean, that was family income. My mother didn't work or whatever. She did do other jobs. She had her own little sewing company and things like that, but that provided a lifestyle for us to thrive. It was, in some ways, it wasn't really walking to work because getting to work was somewhat of a tricky thing.

Now, that brings up a point about how these guys would get to these elevators from the domicile area. From the place where you lived to get to where you worked, you had to go across the tracks or through things or under things to get to work. And everybody did because all the work was on the river, and all the people lived on the other side of the tracks. So as a result of that, you know, to get from A to B, you had to get across the tracks, which is always interesting to me. Yeah. This, again, this is like a collage of all the elevators at the time.[972.23.16 TBHM]. I'm sure you have all these pictures. Yeah.

In any case, the--. Yeah. So the living conditions--. The working condition was to do that. At the foot of Brown Street, they had to construct a steel walkover to--. The CPR had to do that because they didn't want people getting killed hitting trains or getting run over and all the rest of that stuff. So this here was really an easy way to get to the elevators on the Kam River side. Even the wooden elevators I talked to, there was actually an underpass where the guys were able to do that. That's right by the Historical Society.[*Note: by Donald and Simpson. NP*] That passage, that's how the guys got to work.

NP: Ah, okay.

BS: Yeah, they had to go underneath the tracks, otherwise the trains are sitting there, and nobody's moving, then they've got to get to work or back home.

NP: Well, and there were several tracks, and very busy tracks back in those days.

BS: Very busy tracks, especially at the yard where things started to spread. I mean it's--. So yeah, that was always a factor on the Fort William side. Port Arthur side, they were more linear because the elevators were arranged differently. They were arranged out into the lake, so they could come along versus here, everything was along the river, so there was always an issue about the CPR tracks. Yes, for sure.

NP: Have you seen the article in the last *Walleye* magazine on the Brown Street Bridge?

BS: No, I didn't.

NP: It's just a one-page article. It talks a little bit about how the CPR didn't want to build that bridge.

BS: Oh, I can imagine. [Laughs] I can imagine.

NP: And they didn't want to maintain it perpetuity, so you know that story. So.

BS: But that, again, would have facilitated on James Street the underpass. And again, we have a lot of images of that because at that spot before the underpass was there, there was a connection of, I think—one, two, three, four—at least four railways, maybe five, right there. And there was a control at that spot where the trains coming from the west and the east. It would have been the CP going west. There would have been the Grand Truck that crossed to get to the bridge. There was the PD [Port Arthur, Duluth, and Western Railway] line and the CNR [Canadian National Railway] line that come across like that. And then there was, for a little second, there was a city rail or the city bus line that had to go across there too. So I mean it was--.

**[0:35:25]**

NP: The streetcars that went out to Chippewa there.

BS: Streetcars, yeah. And across the bridge. [Laughs] So it was really a traffic jam, some would say, and therefore, when the underpass was put in, it was a big relief for a whole bunch of people.

NP: Do you know approximately when that went in?

BS: Oh. There's images in Thunder Bay, in the Historical--.

NP: Oh, okay.

BS: Of the construction of that. And it's really quite--. If you know what you're looking at, it's pretty neat.

NP: Yes.

BS: And then, that would have been the way the CPR could have argued, "Okay, you can go under the underpass and then get to the elevators," but you've got to kind of go a long ways to get someplace. Yes.

NP: Well, and the bridge pre-dated the underpass, so.

BS: Yes.

NP: It was up by the time--.

BS: Yes.

NP: And they needed to have, by that point, vehicles that could go under, and they weren't going over the Brown Street Bridge. [Laughs] The walkover bridge.

BS: They'd have to take a run at it for sure. [Laughing] But nevertheless, this is all part of the--. There's just a few collages here of these images. But back to my father, yeah. As a matter of fact, a couple of things he mentioned to me when training the young fellows. He could tell right away if they were going to be able to make it or not by the fact that how they performed on the ladder, walking up the ladder. As a matter of fact, a good friend of mine—went to school with him—he thought he'd try the sheet metal trade and all that. My dad, he was with him, and he was afraid of the elevator. Sorry, of the ladder to go up.

NP: What are--.

BS: The young fellow was afraid to go up. My dad says, "You've got to go up there and do this."

NP: What do you mean the ladder?

BS: The ladder to get there.

NP: Just a ladder?

BS: A ladder. Yeah.

NP: How tall would that ladder have been?

BS: I don't know. It was as tall as you had to have to get up to whatever he was doing. But as I said--.

NP: So it didn't need to be an extremely high ladder. It would just be his work on a ladder period?

BS: Some would say. So having said--. [Laughs] But my dad said, "Now, lookit--." When he got down--. He did it, but you could see that the ladder was shaking the whole time, and my dad said, "You know, I'll do it this time," but he says, "You may not be suited for this work because if you get in trouble, we're both in trouble." It's standard in any industry like that, so in fact, if you cannot--. If you feel unsafe to do what you have to do, then you better not do it because you're going to cause too much of a problem for everybody.

So the fellow, eventually he went to the shop, and he said, eventually, "Oh, this is too hard work for me." He got his hands cut too. The other thing about sheet metal is that your hands are going to get cut because you're working with raw edges and sometimes rough edges. So those sheet metal guys, they never wore gloves it seemed, but they always--. I don't think I ever saw my dad with gloves necessarily, but I know that the wear and tear on the hands, yeah, they're cuts, but the cuts would heal. It was significant. But powerful hands to the end because everything was hand snips. Again, that's non-electric. This is big, big hand snips. You know, they were about two-foot long more or less. All by hand. The night he died, he was 95 years old, in January—the anniversary is coming up soon here—he shook my hand. He hurt my hand. He hurt my hand he was so powerful, even to the end. That night he died. So that's the story of the sheet metal, and the legacy, I guess you could say, of that. Yeah.

NP: I love those stories. You know, the little pieces like that. The technical background information, I'm hoping, will be of some use to historians as time goes on, but these personal interest--. Just the ladder situation brings something visual to you, the strong hands says so much.

BS: Oh, yeah.

NP: That they're, to my mind, the priceless stories that come out in these interviews. Thank you. Now, where do we go? Yeah. Now, your mother, I think the last time that we were listening to her story, she had moved here to be a Rosie the Riveter.

BS: Right.

NP: Was there any connections, other than the farm connection in her early life, any connection to the grain industry here in Thunder Bay, your mom's side of the family?

**[0:40:23]**

BS: No. I'm going to have to say nothing direct, for sure.

NP: Okay.

BS: But the legacy of her having come through the Prairies--. And again, that's a nice segue for me because back in the '70s—actually from 1971 to '73—every fall, I would go out to Saskatchewan to harvest grain, and that was so exciting for me because there was a sense of purpose. My aunt would call, my mother's sister. They ended up with, what, four, five sections of land out there, and she would call in August, say, "Is Bill coming?" Right away, my mother would just ask, and I said, "When? Just tell me when." She said, "We need you by next week. You've got to be here."

So I had my little Volkswagen, my 1971 Volkswagen black Beetle, and she just loved the ride. We'd go nonstop from here to Elrose, which is by Rosetown. I'd just drive 18 hours steady. Shouldn't have done it, but did. Take the sunrise, the sunset, get on the--. Drive it into the field, and the tractor would be there, and right onto the swather. Leave the Volks parked right by the tractor, and she had a big swather. It was about, what 22-foot bed on her, and just start making circles because you had to knock the grain down to get it ready in rows. So at least if it's down, it wouldn't--. All the other weather issues were minimized when the grain was down.

Then you had to wait until she ripened. Sometimes it was ripe, sometimes it wasn't. And then be swathing, swathing, swathing for three, four, five days in a row. Sometimes if the crops were really heavy, I remember—oh, my God—there was one down at the Hallar place there where it was 90 bushels to the acre of barley, 2-row barley. 4-row barley. It was probably about almost four feet high. Well, three and a half, four feet high. I had to pull the table up so much so that I could cut it, and when I cut it, it would barely the conveyor could pull it and then drop it, and it would thatch inside the stubble. Holy cow! We had a lot of trouble picking that grain up. And then the ducks were right beside in the pond. Oh, it was just a mess. But that was 90 bushels to the acre, that stuff.

However, swathing, swathing, swathing, swathing. And then when she was ready, we didn't wake up early. You had to wake up whenever. Early meaning early, early. Wake up maybe about 8:30, have a good breakfast, get to the field sometime around 9:30 maybe 10:00—whatever, 9:30—and just get threshing because you couldn't thresh if it was tight, and it would all be going over the concaves, would just be kicking it out. So you had to wait later, and then once it was going, then I'd drive truck, the five-tonne truck there, and unload two combines on the run all the time. And then run like hell to the granaries and then hope the auger would work and start the box coming up and the slot coming out to the little bunker you'd made. Then you'd go and you'd run the auger, and then the auger doesn't work. Then you've got to run and drop the box again. Oh! It's a real performance, but a lot of fun. Exhilarating. It was not a dull day.

And then, you ate four times a day. They'd bring all the--. My aunt and my sister-in-law and all the kids, they all come out the field. You'd just circle the wagon, circle the equipment, put a tarp down in the field. You'd just sit, and then they'd bring you food. You'd just eat, eat, eat, eat, and as soon as you--. No talking. Just eat, eat, eat, eat. *Whew!* Up and go. That was harvesting for--. I did that for how many years? Three years, four years. Yeah. So that was neat.

Then if it was a rainy day or whatever, something like that, nothing was happening, I used to go to the farm where my mother--. The old homestead out in the Prairies just to get a feel for the living condition, as well as come back and my uncle would tell me, he says, "You know, what we harvest in a day, that was their yearly output." He said, "With stooking and moving with the grain, shovelling with scoops into the granary and all that kind of stuff." So you really, really meant--. There was a depth of field when I was on the Prairies to be able to see that.

**[0:45:36]**

Then at nighttime, those stars. Oh, my God! And that dome! You'd be driving back late at night, and sometimes we used to go until 2:00 in the morning with lights on if the grain was moving. Then once you got tough, you shut her down and come in back. That dome of stars, it's like when you're out in the middle of Lake Superior and you see this dome of magic. That's what is in the Prairies. It's just there. Yeah, yeah.

NP: It's interesting. Very well told. Quite poetic, there, Bill. Very nice. Were you ever thinking--. Well, you actually drew a connection—and I think other people have drawn it a little bit, but not so directly—about the flatness, the open spaces of the Prairies, and the flatness and the open spaces of the lake. Did you ever talk to your Prairie family about Thunder Bay and its end of this grain trail?



BS: Oh, yeah. They were very, very knowledgeable and sensitive too. They understood what it meant to transport it and when they could sell the grain. All the issues were on price, et cetera, to the farmer. They were very, very important. Growing it is what they do, but getting it sold and getting money for it was always a challenge. To be honest, those guys out in Eston, they were one of the first group to break away from straight durum or plusher durum or 2- or 4-row barley, monolithic fields, and get into lentils and peas and canary seed and all the other crops that could get them a higher value.

NP: Specialty crops.

BS: Specialty crops. As a matter of fact, apparently there's a variety of lentils called Eston lentils, which is from that area. I mean, that's where they--. They were experimental enough to be able to--. And the land probably allowed them to do that too. Like, it wasn't as if--. Some of their land was like pool table flat and all the rest, but others were a little bit rolling land, and that might have lent itself well to less--. Soil conditions and various things like that would have told them. They were very knowledgeable that way. They were quite--.

The government, I guess, guys would come and talk and all the rest of that stuff, and they knew their land. They knew their soil, and they were willing to gamble on other crops other than those traditional crops. Rapeseed, for example, wasn't as profitable there because they couldn't put in the thousands and thousands of acres to get the return, as well as the equipment for drying and for all that other stuff wasn't at hand. As well as handling. I mean the rape stocks and like flax stocks really are tougher to massage and to break down, and therefore handling the straw from those crops is a different technique than from barley straw or from oat straw or all the rest of that kind of stuff. So yeah, they were experimental early, I'll put it that way, with those other crops.

**[Audio pauses]**

NP: We took a little bit of a pause so that we could discuss where we're going to from here, but the question I have now, Bill, for you is because of the experience that you had on the Prairies—and you got up close and personal with the various crops that were being produced and shipped—did that renew or create an interest in you in what was going in the elevators? The sort of other end of what we'll call at this point the grain trail, at least the land, grain trail?

**[0:50:10]**

BS: Okay. So both you and I grew up in this area of Westfort, and we, before even we were born, we heard the sounds of elevators and the sounds of trains on the hump breaking up cars and various things like that. This is kind of in our blood here, whether we like it or not, and in our ears. And because of that, and whether your father or you knew people or your neighbours or whatever

worked in the industry, et cetera, we have a natural curiosity about all of the things that were around us within--. If you drew a circle from where you were born and I was born of about two miles maybe, you would have all the sounds of industry in our area. The boats in the river blowing the bridge, the CPR, the CNR running across town. All of that stuff is in--. Whether we like it or not.

So that's the natural interest that we all have in here whether--. And you just have to scratch the surface and it's there. So that's kind of a base level of inquiry. I think that the people--. Okay, this is a Port Arthur, Fort William thing. I think that the people in Port Arthur don't have the same appreciation because they don't have that same audible--. They've got a different visual, and therefore, it's not about them, it's about why we are so curious in our area here. We see the construction. We see--. We hear the operations. We smell the grain. I mean, when Ogilvie's was venting, you smelt that, all the rest of this stuff over the Kam River. Every time we rode in the Kam River, we'd row by these things, and so these are monoliths.

Okay. So that impression has been there for a long time, and deep—visual, mental, audible, nasal. Now, having gone out to the Prairies, it just enhanced the story because now I was able to touch the earth there and to do things that were meaningful in a harvest sense—the urgency of the harvest, et cetera—and then to see it and understand it maybe better, all the railroads, all the methods of transportation, the terminals, the operations of the terminals. Always a puzzle to a point, but once you see it once, then things start to make sense to you inside the elevators, and I've gone through elevator tours that have allowed me to mechanically get a richer picture in your mind.

And by the same token, the demise of the elevators. The fact that the small elevators couldn't survive, and sometimes even large elevators had to be blown down. That's why I--. For example, when Elevator D—this elevator we're looking at now—was decommissioned, and in her final day that she was still stood, I heard on the radio that it was going to be blown down. I ran there with my camera and took pictures of the workhouse being blown down. I had no natural interest in photography that way, but it was a way of recording it as an event.

The same thing when elevator Pool 6, Sask Pool, was blown down. And maybe I did that as an honour to my father now that I think about it because the day that that elevator got blown down, they'd already loaded it up with explosives. And so, I took my father. I said, "You're coming with me. We're going. It doesn't matter. We're just going." So I took him there, and we stood almost in the front row, and as it was being blown down, I wanted him to see that monolith, that monument to the grain industry here disappearing. Fine. Because he'd worked on it. He'd been up at the top of that elevator before, doing flashing around the top, putting in the early dust collection systems, all that stuff. Working on the inside for chutes and belts and all the rest of that stuff. So it was a kind of a closure. It was a loop in my mind to be able to have him witness that, and for me to be there. And we got pictures of it too, so that gave me comfort that it just didn't get blown down as a kind of a stunt or something along those lines. And many of the other ones too, but it was mostly those two—Elevator D here in the Kam River and Pool 6, the old Canadian Northern

elevator. That was the reason why they completed the Canadian Northern Railroad in record time. They had to run the PD line rails to get here. They did that for the, I think, 1901 crop. So--.

**[0:55:29]**

NP: Um--.

BS: That gives me a connector. We in Thunder Bay can do that because we can see the end. We can see where the wheels meet the keels, where the wheels of the rails meet the keels of the boats, and away it goes. Where its going? Who knows! Whether it's a laker, you kind of figure it out. If it's a saltie, it's going to some romantic place wherever in Arabia, whatever. In any case, that's how my bloodline and my actions helped me talk the way I do.

NP: Okay. Great. Obviously, a passionate connection, which serves an interview very well. But I'm going to take you back to that day that you took your dad to Pool 6, in particular, and I want you to say a little bit about what your dad was feeling and saying. And I'd like you to relive that—what—ten-minute period when just before it was blown up, when it was blown up, and when, literally, the dust settles.

BS: Okay. So--.

NP: How was your dad feeling?

BS: My dad never showed his emotions in an overt fashion. He was quiet through the episode. I kind of knew what was going to be happening, of course. He probably--. No. I don't think he ever had seen an elevator--. I'm looking at D Elevator right now just to stimulate my mind. He never saw Elevator D going down. I did. It's a raw emotion when a large, strong building is no longer there standing for you to see it visually. I think quiet is probably the first word that comes to my mind.

There was a friend of ours who stood beside us. He found us there, and he stood beside us, and he was somewhat quiet too initially, and then he started asking my dad questions, as I remember. And my dad offered him questions. So it was a point. You know, it was almost a--. It was his moment to almost say a worker's prayer, you might say, to the fact that all of this stuff had gone down. Now, he wasn't in the operations of it, but he was in the services related to putting dust equipment in and making things go. [Laughs] And all of that stuff. So that gave him an audience.

I think it was Burt Watt who was our neighbour. Really, really nice man there. My father really liked the guy. Burt asked him honest questions. My dad gave him honest answers. It was an opportunity. It was a theatre of opportunities to be able to talk like that. There was no bragging, as I understand. There was just mechanical--. Burt was very interested because my father said, "You see up there? I used to be up there," type of thing. So it was an opportunity to go for a mental ride on my dad's story. Yeah.

NP: And the physical reactions to the--?

BS: Well, there was no tears if that's--. Or whatever. But everybody was far enough away we didn't have to run from the blast or the smoke or the dust. But I remember we were far back. I think we were in the Northern Wood yard, if I'm not mistaken. They wouldn't let people come close, of course. But it was--. There was a big crowd because it was both Port Arthur and Fort William people that would have been involved here. Elevator D, I was by myself watching this picture. [Laughs] No, there was another guy from the news place there too, if I'm not mistaken, but it was like another brick in the wall to let this piece of building come down.

NP: And with Pool 6, that was a huge building.

BS: Yes, it was.

NP: So what was the--. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but the earth shook. No?

BS: Oh, well, yeah, because you can hear--. You feel the vibrations. It's sonic. This is like--. It's how they do geophysical work or geology people, they put a transmitter and receiver over here, and you bounce it off of whatever's down below, and you find that there's gold down there. But this is--. There's a thump that you remember. And in this case, Elevator D didn't--. I think it toppled. They had to be careful they didn't hit the tracks. Whereas in the other one, there was sections that blew out differentially, one way or the other, if I'm not mistaken. It was meant to rubble a building without impairing life. High angle demolition.

NP: So when the explosion was over and the dust settled, what was the first thing your dad said?

BS: [Laughs] I can't remember. That was quite a while ago.

NP: 24 years, approximately. [Laughs]

BS: There you go! Thank you for the note. I don't--. There wasn't really--.

NP: Like, “Oh, well,” or-- [Laughs]

BS: No, no. There wasn't none of that, “Well, okay. That's just another weiner on the barbeque.” No. It was never that way with my father. No, because he wouldn't have had that expression for sure. I do-- But no, it wasn't a matter of fact, “Okay, let's go to the bar.” He'd never do that anyway. Or casino or-- No, no, no. Go home. It resonated with him for sure, and he was, I think, probably also, thinking about it, he might have been looking for other contemporary workers in the crowd, people that might have also been with that. I don't think we saw anybody. No. There was our neighbour that we chatted with. If I had my images up here-- And I've got my pictures someplace here. I won't look for them now. But I don't think there was anybody. A lot of his old compatriots had passed away. Trimble had died, a few other guys, Swan Anderson, those guys, Dan Blaze, they were all gone. Damford was busy doing stuff. So no, I don't think he talked about that.

NP: Okay. Good. No, I'm amazed at what you do remember, so I ask the question just in hope that it might stimulate something. I wasn't here for that. We were still living in Winnipeg at the time, but I do recall people talking about gathering, and I guess the one thing that upsets me—maybe because I have a fondness for these old elevators in spite of their pitfalls—were the people that were toasting it with champagne. “Yay, there it goes! There goes the eyesore!”

BS: Yeah. There might have been.

NP: Do you think how your dad might have felt if he was standing beside those people? Or how you yourself would feel?

BS: I think he would have just looked. I would have reacted. He would have just looked them in the eye and probably said nothing. Body language. He would have just did it this way. And I would have said-- Oh, Jesus. I'm sure I would have made some snide remark about that, about their inertness to what they were looking at. They were doing that there as a spectacle. You know, I mean, I could use all kinds of analogies. Currently, I won't right now because it would get nasty quick. But nevertheless, I'm sure there was a cohort of those people there. They weren't where we were. [Laughs] So I'm just trying to quickly see if I had that image. Maybe just stop for now. Let me see if I can get those images for you here.

**[1:05:00]**

**[Audio pauses]**

NP: Once again, we had a pause to discuss in what direction we were going, and it seems appropriate at this time, since we've had just over an hour of the interview and the purpose of this interview has been to take a look at Bill's personal family connection to

the grain industry—which he’s done a very good job of—and I have suggested that we call an end to today’s session. But we still have other areas very important to the grain trade in Thunder Bay that need to be covered that Bill has a lot of depth and information on. So we’ll set up a third interview and move into the transportation side, including, obviously, the railways and also the lake shipping out from the port. So I’ll say thank you. Any closing remarks, Bill?

BS: No. Thank you very much for the opportunity to expand, and you’re doing a noble job. Keep it up. We will be able to fill in as many blanks as we can from a historical perspective.

NP: Great. And I also want to say, in case something happens to me and I’m no longer around to say it, that Bill has a fantastic photo collection, some of which he’s drawn from the Thunder Bay Museum for his particular purposes. So just keep in mind that he does have a wealth of photographic information to add depth to our discussions. So thanks again, Bill. We’ll meet again.

BS: On the animal, here we go.

**End of interview.**