

Narrator: Carmel Smillie (CS)

Company Affiliations: Lake Shippers Clearance Association (Canadian Ports Clearance Association)

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Summary: Former typist for the Lake Shippers Clearance Association Carmel Smillie discusses her work for the organization in Thunder Bay in the late '40s and early '50s. She begins by describing the layout of the office in the Chapple's Building. She explains her duties as a typist making copies of the bills of lading for grain ships in the summer and boxcars in the winters, and she describes how she used the Gestetner to make extra copies for the ships. She shares the importance of making these copies perfect so the grain accounting was accurate. Other topics discussed include the high turnover rate for girls in the typist position, growing up in Fort William near the elevators, visiting a ship to see grain loading, and moving around the country with her husband.

Keywords: Lake Shippers Clearance Association (Canadian Ports Clearance Association); Grain transportation—ships; Grain transportation—rail; Bills of lading; Typists; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Chapple's Building; The Grain Exchange—Thunder Bay; Women in the workplace; Gestetners; Fort William

Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: It's August the 13 th , 2012, and I am meeting with Mrs. Smillie in her lovely apartment at the Heritage at 63 Carrie Street. I'm going to ask her to introduce herself and tell us her connection to the grain trade. So over to you.
CS: I'm Carmel Smillie, and I worked for Lake Shippers in the Grain Exchange. It was the fifth floor in the Chapple's Building in Fort William. We had to do bills of lading for all the ships that came to the Lakehead, and we would type up the order and how much tons of grain they took—or barley or whatever—and what elevators they were taking it from. And we would have to make up the bills of lading and run them on the Gestetner. [Laughs] Then we had to put them together and get them all ready before the ship left the harbour.

NP: So several things come to my mind. Because you had a fairly specialized job, I think I'll go through some of our standard questions, but there's some special ones that I wanted to ask you because of the work you did. Let's start with when did you start with Lake Shippers?

CS: Well, I think it was in '45 I had worked for the Canada Car, and then I went to other jobs, and then got that one.

NP: So you were working, then--. If I might ask, how old were you when you started working for them?

CS: I'm trying to think how old I'd be, maybe 21 or 20.

NP: And you were not married at the time--.

CS: No.

NP: So your name at the time was--?

CS: Was Carmel Simone.

NP: Okay. What was Chapple's Building like back then?

CS: It was a beautiful building, and we were on the fifth floor. We could go to Roodle's [sp?]for coffee. Have you ever heard of Roodle's?

NP: I have not heard of Roodle's.

CS: Oh, Roodle's was the nicest coffee shop anybody ever would want to go to, and we would get rolls and hamburgers or whatever. It was really nice. They had one in Fort William and one in Port Arthur.

NP: And where was it in relation to the Chapple's Building?

CS: It was right across the street from the Chapple's Building.

NP: So where--. There was an annex--.

CS: There's a pub there or something. Right in there.

NP: Oh, okay. Newfie's Pub.

CS: Yeah. We used to go right--. And the door would be facing Chapple's. Like we'd come out of our door and go in there. It was really the nicest coffee shop they ever had. [Laughs]

NP: And did you notice what else was going on in that building at the time when you started?

CS: In--?

NP: In Chapple's.

CS: Oh. Well, there were other Grain Exchange offices there, but I never knew of any.

NP: Why was it called the Grain Exchange, do you know?

CS: I don't know. Because we had the office for Lake Shippers, and there were a few other offices. There was a fellow that worked in our office that had one of those radios, and he would radio back and forth to the ships.

NP: The shortwave radios or the ship-to-shore?

CS: Yeah. Well, we had a radio in our office that we would contact the ships when they were coming in, I guess.

NP: So you were a young woman, 21, at the time that you started. What caused you to work there?

CS: Well, apparently what they used to do was lay the girls off in the fall. See, all you had to do in the winter—the fall, well, the winter—was do the boxcars that left from Thunder Bay or Fort William. There wouldn't be that many, so they didn't need all us girls. There was about six of us, I think. So then they would lay three or four or five off and just keep one. I guess they found they couldn't hire experienced staff, so they had to keep us all winter long. So after we did the boxcars in the winter, we would knit or crochet, and we learned how to play Canasta. We had a lot of fun.

[0:05:21]

NP: So how did you get a line on the job? You said you were working at Canada Car.

CS: I guess through the Unemployment Insurance. That was it. Unemployment Insurance because Miss Jones worked for the Unemployment Insurance. She sent me there, and I got the job.

NP: So you come off the elevator—and I don't know the when the last time you were back to the--.

CS: I haven't been back there. I should have.

NP: To the building. But you came off the elevator, and then you turned to the right, and you had a fairly large space at the time you started.

CS: Yes, we did. We had a big office. All the bosses were in the front part, and all us girls were at the back. We all had a desk with a typewriter, and we had to type these bills of lading. We would all be busy, busy all summer long. The people that owned the boats, like Paterson and other--. I don't remember too many other.

NP: Canadian Steamship Lines [CSL] and--.

CS: Yeah. Well, they would take us over at Christmas time and give us all kinds of gifts. One time they even took us on one of the boats so we could see them load the grain. That was really interesting. It was in the fall one year. Really, we enjoyed that.

NP: Who were some of the people there then?

CS: Well, you know, I can't remember too many of them.

NP: Did you have a boss?

CS: Oh, yes. We had Mr. Mulligan, I think, and Jack Hindel was one of the bosses too. *Cec[Cecil] Marshall*, and he died about three or four years ago. He was quite a nice guy.

NP: He had been there for a long time.

CS: Yeah. And Bill Sinclair, I think. Bill--. Yeah, they're all passed away now. The girls I worked with, a lot of them were leaving town and would quit and go away. So I don't remember too many of the other ones.

NP: I did take a look at some of these older employee records. So I mentioned to you that my grandfather worked at Lake Shippers as a messenger and a caretaker.

CS: Oh.

NP: A lot of the women seemed to leave when they got married. Was that--?

CS: Yeah.

NP: Required, or--?

CS: Well, it was sort of required at that time because they wanted younger people to get the jobs, or more young people--. Like, there was a lot of people that were looking for jobs. Yeah.

NP: So what do you think the philosophy was behind--?

CS: Well, they did that all over. It wasn't just at Lake Shippers. They did that at quite a few places, and then they quit it, you know? I guess they figured once you got married, you had a husband to look after you. You didn't need to be working. [Laughs] But at that time too, they kept us on all winter, which was pretty nice, and we learned how to knit and sew. We didn't sew there, but we learned how to knit, and we went to the Y to learn how to play Canasta. We had a nice bunch, but a lot of them were married and left. And then I got married and left town, so.

NP: How long did you work for them?

CS: Until '51.

NP: Oh. So a good long time. You were one of the longer lasting employees then because they oftentimes, from records I saw, didn't last for more than a year or three.

CS: Yeah. People would move and get other jobs, you know, at that time. But it was a nice place to work.

NP: You started to describe what the office looked like. So you said you came in the door, and--.

CS: You go through where all the managers had their desks. I think the manager had his own office, but then the other people would have a desk, you know? Then we had--. There were desks in a row—one, two, three, four, five, six.

[0:10:00]

NP: And what kind of records were kept? Were there storage cabinets for records or were they big books?

CS: I don't remember too much about the files. Like, all I remember is we would type up--. They would come and give us what we had to type up, and we had to type it up and make sure it was perfect, you know? Then we would run it off on the Gestetner and put it together, and we had to make so many copies, and they had to be all ready before the ship left.

NP: Now, some people listening to this—believe it or not—would not know what a Gestetner is. Can you describe a Gestetner?
[Laughs]

CS: A Gestetner is a--. What would they call them now? It's a machine where you make copies. See, you'd have to stand there, and you'd have to put it on. Like, when you type this copy up, you had to put it on the Gestetner and make sure it was nice and smooth.

NP: The Gestetner, if I recall—because I do recall gestetners—it was sort of like a drum.

CS: Yeah. And you had to make sure everything was nice and even, and then you would run it off.

NP: There must have been some kind of ink involved.

CS: Oh, yes. You had to put ink, and then you had to read it and make sure everything was right and legible, and then you ran off as many copies as you had to. Sometimes it would be four or five pages.

NP: So it would be a crank that you would be turning?

CS: Yeah. You would crank it. Mmhmm. It was a copy machine, that's what it is. Yeah.

NP: And where would those copies go?

CS: Well, we would have to put them all together, you know, several copies, and then somebody would take them to the ship, and they would have to take them wherever they went because it would tell them how much wheat they got from whatever elevator they were going to and how much grain or oats or whatever. I guess they would have to pay for it. [Laughs]

NP: Speaking of paying for it, when I was in--. I mentioned I went to see Mr. Ward, who was the final general manager leaving at the end of the month as they closed down Lake Shippers, there was a big safe in the hallway. Do you remember that safe?

CS: No. But I imagine they would have to keep those because when we finished them, we would take them up to the manager, and they would do whatever they had to do with them, check them out, make sure they were right. Everything, every word had to be perfect.

NP: I expect the numbers had to be pretty--.

CS: Yes. They had to be right because you had to have how many tons or whatever.

NP: During your six years or so there, there were probably quite a number of people who came on in the clerk and typist positions. What do you think made a good worker there? What did it take to be--?

CS: Well, you had to be a good typist, and when we worked, we really worked. Like in the summertime when the ships started, we worked. [Laughs]

NP: What were the hours, do you recall?

CS: I think we worked from 9:00 until 5:00 or something. Yeah.

NP: So you had to be a good typist.

CS: Had to be a good typist.

NP: That was it?

CS: Well, you had to know what you were typing, you know? Yeah. Of course, everything you had to type by hand. Got carpal tunnel from it. [Laughs] But anyway, it was interesting. I enjoyed it.

NP: Did you get an opportunity to learn much about ships and elevators?

CS: Well, they did take us to the ships, and we saw what was going on, but that's about all because in the summertime, we were really busy. But the winter was kind of nice. [Laughing]

NP: If someone was--. Was there a place to advance to when you came in as a--?

CS: Well, no. We were all doing the same thing, and sometimes we would do shorthand if there was--. There was one girl that did the shorthand, and if she wasn't there, he would just come and give it to anybody that looked like they weren't doing anything. But that's about it. I don't think you ever went anywhere. You just worked there.

[0:15:11]

NP: It was a typing pool.

CS: Yeah.

NP: Was there a manager of the typing pool?

CS: Yeah. We had a manager. We had, like, Cec[Cecil] Marshall, and we had Jack Hindel. I think Jack Hindel was kind of a biggie. And then we had our boss. There was about four or five guys that worked. Bill Sinclair worked there too, and he was kind of younger than the rest. They're all passed away.

NP: If somebody new was coming on, was it pretty easy to get with the flow of the work right away?

CS: Well, if you could type, I think you were okay.

NP: Were people ever let go?

CS: Never. Never.

NP: No?

CS: Everybody who worked there seemed to--. A lot of the people—a lot of the girls—would quit to go to Toronto or somewhere with their boyfriend, you know, and leave. Or sometimes they would leave for a different job, but mostly--.

NP: Could anybody not do the job?

CS: We all did a good job. Yeah.

NP: Yeah. So making mistakes or whatever, people were--.

CS: Well, we had to check everything before. Everything was, you know, you'd read it, and then you'd check what they gave you and made sure everything was perfect.

NP: That's pretty precise, especially if you were having to work long days at it.

CS: Yeah. Yeah, it had to be perfect. It helped me get a job at the--. I ended up working at the high school in Edmonton because I knew how to use a Gestetner, so I could run exams. I got hired. It was funny. I shouldn't say this, but it wasn't a Catholic school, and the principal hired me, and when I went to the school board to get the job, they didn't hire me because I was Catholic.

NP: Hm!

CS: So I come home and told my husband. I says, "They're not going to hire me because I'm Catholic, and the principal at the other school had told me to come to work on Monday." So Monday came, and I didn't go to work. So he phoned me, and he says, "What happened? Why aren't you at work?" I says, "Well, they told me they weren't going to hire me." And he says, "You get in here and get to work." And they hired me. [Laughing]

NP: So you left then to get married?

CS: Yeah. I got married, and my husband was an engineer. We lived from Newfoundland to Yellowknife.

NP: Wow! What kind of engineering did he do?

CS: He built roads and bridges.

NP: Okay.

CS: So I would work wherever.

NP: So you had skills that were transferrable.

CS: Yeah.

NP: Was it a sad day, the day you left Lake Shippers?

CS: Not really because I was getting married. [Laughs]

NP: Pretty exciting.

CS: Yeah. Yeah. I don't think I saw much of the girls after because I was away, you know? Then they would leave too. Yeah, no.

NP: When they hired you and as you worked there, what was your sense of the Canadian grain industry? Did you have any thoughts about that?

CS: I really didn't know other than living in Fort William there was all these grain elevators, you know? [Laughs] You sort of knew they were being filled with grain from the boxcars that came over here.

NP: Did you live close by an elevator?

CS: I lived down Southern Avenue.

NP: On which avenue?

CS: Southern Avenue.

NP: Oh, okay. Right.

CS: Yeah. We used to walk to school.

NP: So that was a fair walk for you.

CS: Yes, it was.

NP: Down to Saint Stan's.

CS: I think I used to walk to work too. I used to walk to work too. Yeah.

NP: Those were the days where just your lifestyle kept you fit.

CS: Yeah. [Laughs]

NP: So you were down at the display.

[0:20:00]

CS: Yes, I was. I really enjoyed it.

NP: What did you like about it?

CS: Oh, I just liked seeing the wheat and the barley and the oats because I guess I had seen it, but it was so nice to see it in the jars. I thought it was well displayed. And the girl I talked to was very nice.

NP: So when you were working at Lake Shippers, did you get to see grain products, or was it just paper?

CS: Not really. We just went to one boat that I was there, and they showed us how they were putting the wheat from the elevator into the boats. They had this long chutes. [Laughs] That's about all.

NP: Pretty impressive, I would think.

CS: Yeah, it was at that time. Yeah, yeah.

NP: So you got a sense of how what you were doing was--.

CS: Yeah, yeah.

NP: Important.

CS: Yeah.

NP: If you didn't do it right, somebody would not get treated fairly.

CS: Oh, no. It had to be perfect. Yeah.

NP: Any connection with the Winnipeg office?

CS: No, I don't remember with them at all. No. I don't know. Maybe the bosses did, but I don't know.

NP: I think some at one time came from Winnipeg, but I don't know how many of them did while you were there.

CS: Oh.

NP: They started their careers in Winnipeg.

CS: Oh, and came here?

NP: Came here.

CS: No, it was all settled when I went to work. Like, it was a real big office, but it was a nice office to work in.

NP: What made it a nice office to work in, do you think?

CS: Well, we all had enough room, and we could sit and chat if we had nothing to do. But if we were busy, you had to produce. Well, it had to be perfect because you just couldn't send stuff like that that wasn't.

NP: Yeah, it could cost somebody a fair amount of money because you were dealing with big numbers, right?

CS: Yeah. Yes. Those ships were pretty big. Yeah. They would get stuff from different elevators, so it had to be down, what they got at whatever elevator.

NP: You had to be able to add.

CS: Yeah.

NP: Did you use special machines for adding, or was that somebody else's job?

CS: No, when they brought everything to you, it was all set up, and you just had to copy it and type it. Yeah. Type it right. You have to put so much on a page, you know?

NP: I've seen some copies of those pages.

CS: Did you? Oh. So the office is still open?

NP: Well, it's on the opposite side of the hallway, and it's just one little office.

CS: Oh. I think I'll go up there. Can you go up the elevator?

NP: Yeah. Now, I don't know who is currently in the old offices that you would have been in, but the Canadian Ports Clearance Association [CPCA] is on the right-hand side, the last office on that part of the hallway, and it will only be there for the--.

CS: Yeah. I should get a hold of Phillip Payne because I usually see him in the mornings, you know? I go to mass over at the cathedral at 9:00 in the morning. He goes for coffee in Victoriaville.

NP: Well, it would be open until the end of this month. Stop in and see Mr. Ward and introduce yourself.

CS: Yeah. I'll grab a hold of Phil and say, "Come on, we're going for a walk." [Laughs] Yeah.

NP: Yeah, see if you can persuade him to be interviewed too.

CS: I tried to talk him into it, but--.

NP: No, it seems he's got a mind of his own. Yeah. So any questions I haven't asked you that I should have asked?

CS: I don't know. Like what? [Laughs]

NP: If nothing springs to mind--.

CS: I just enjoyed my work there.

NP: You weren't there for very long, so did you experience any changes? Were things changed in the time that you were there?

CS: No.

NP: Or it was the routine stayed pretty much the same?

CS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we all had--. You know, you pretty well had the same job to do, and you had to do it and do it right. And fast. [Laughs]

NP: And fast.

CS: Yeah. And learn how to run the Gestetner.

NP: So I would think that if you weren't fast and you weren't accurate, you left.

CS: Yeah. But you know, it was fun working the Gestetner. [Laughs] Then you had to put them all together, put them on and take them over to the boss.

NP: I would imagine his desk got pretty crowded.

CS: Oh, yeah. Well, they would be getting rid of this stuff as soon as--. You know.

[0:25:05]

NP: So the messengers. I mentioned that my grandfather was hired on as a messenger and caretaker. So as a messenger, he might actually have delivered some of those things?

CS: Yeah, probably. Yeah.

NP: Hm.

CS: Yeah, it was nice. The people that worked there were very nice. Yeah, we never ran into any--.

NP: Any of the office politics that you oftentimes--.

CS: No. Everybody was nice, and I enjoyed it. It was a nice place to work.

NP: What happened to the coffee shop?

CS: I don't know because I left.

NP: Ah.

CS: They had one in Port Arthur and one in Fort William. It was called Roodle's.

NP: Was that the name of the family?

CS: I don't know. But they had the nicest coffee shop, and it was always packed. Just the other day, I was talking about Roodle's, and somebody said, "Oh, yeah! I remember Roodle's." But they were right across the street.

NP: Mmhmm. Was that where Mahon's eventually went in? Because I worked at Kresge's, so I'm just trying to think.

CS: No, it was--. Right now, there's the Newfie's Pub there.

NP: Yeah.

CS: That might have been Kresge's.

NP: No, Cresgie's was down the next block.

CS: Oh, okay. I don't know what was there.

NP: Because that's where I worked.

CS: Yeah.

NP: Then there was Woolworth's. On the other side of me was another coffee shop, and that was the Lorna Doone.

CS: Oh, yeah. That was the restaurant.

NP: The restaurant.

CS: Yeah, yeah. It was right--. It was facing Victoria Avenue, but this one here faced was it Brodie Street that's there? Or--.

NP: Syndicate.

CS: Syndicate.

NP: Syndicate, right.

CS: It was facing Syndicate Avenue. Yeah, because we would cross the street, and they would be like right at the tail end of that pub.

NP: Yeah, yeah. Hm! Well, it must have been an exciting time in downtown Fort William.

CS: Oh, yeah.

NP: It was right after the war, so.

CS: It was, and it was a lovely--. I don't know why they built that mall. You know, it just--.

NP: Destroyed the street life.

CS: Yeah. Yeah.

NP: People wanted to be in out of the harsh elements.

CS: Yeah.

NP: Obviously, they weren't walking back and forth to work everyday.

CS: I know. I was working in Ottawa, and they built a mall like that that cut off the street, and they tore it down. Yeah.

NP: Seemed like a good idea at the time.

CS: Yeah.

NP: So were you working at Lake Shippers when they had the explosion?

CS: No.

NP: No. So it was after that. You must have started in the fall?

CS: Yeah. I think so. Yeah. I don't remember that because I got married, and then I just travelled with my husband. We were all over. We ended up in Ottawa, and he ended up being a director of engineering and architecture for Parks Canada.

NP: Really?

CS: Yeah.

NP: Wow. That must have been an exciting career.

CS: So he got that picture of the Parliament Building--.

NP: Ah, parliament buildings.

CS: And he got the first one, and was it Rooney, our Prime Minister--?

NP: Mulroney.

CS: Mulroney got the second one.

NP: Hm! Wow. He would have been a good person to help us. Our group, Friends of Grain Elevators, is trying to set up a Parks Canada sponsored national historic site here to recognize the grain industry.

CS: Oh.

NP: What do you think about that idea?

CS: That's a good idea. He opened up Pukaskwa.

NP: Ah.

CS: Yeah, and then one in Newfoundland. I forget the name of it.

NP: Gros Morne?

CS: Gros Morne, yeah. Yeah, because we did live there for a while, but it wasn't with Parks Canada. He went to Yellowknife and Fort Smith, and then from there, he was transferred to Ottawa. No, to Edmonton. Went to Edmonton, and then from Edmonton to Ottawa.

NP: And then you came back to Thunder Bay?

CS: Yeah. Well, my husband passed away, and I stayed in Ottawa for a while. And then I had a camp here at Green Bay, so I came back and forth.

NP: Oh, okay.

CS: And then I decided to come back, and I bought a house on Moodie Street, and I sold it to come here. Then I finally sold the camp because I go to Florida for five months.

NP: That's nice. Yes, we used to rent a camp at Pebbly Beach, so that was--.

CS: Oh, yeah. It's a nice beach.

NP: So would you know the Mackenzies? I think they were at Green Bay.

CS: I don't know. Don't remember them.

NP: Mackenzie family. Prescotts were there.

CS: I remember the Bonnets that lived next door to us.

NP: Oh, okay. That name sounds familiar.

CS: Mrs. Bonnet, yeah.

NP: Yeah.

CS: Yeah, she was a lovely person.

NP: Well, if there's nothing more that you'd like to add--.

CS: No.

NP: I think I can probably close off the interview.

CS: Yeah. It was a lovely place to work.

NP: That's good to know. We'll see if we can get that Mr. Payne to add his comments. So thanks again.

CS: Thank you.

End of interview.