Narrator: Bob Speak (BS)

Company Affiliations: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool

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Interviewer: Ian Dew (ID)

Recorder: Ian Dew (ID)

Transcriber: Sarah Lorenowich

Summary: Former General Foreman for Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Bob Speak discusses his 39 years in Thunder Bay's terminal elevators. Speak first describes joining the elevators as a labourer at 17 years old, and after only a year on the job, he recounts the Pool 4A elevator explosion he experienced and its aftermath. He describes the typical work he was doing on the cleaner deck when the explosion occurred, the typical number of employees working during the day, and the different elevator departments. Speak explains in detail how grain moved through the elevator from unloading to ship loading, and the different people who interacted with it on the job. He then discusses his other work as tunnel man during shipping operations, as well as eventually moving into management and taking on increasing responsibilities. He recalls the dangerous work conditions due to the grain dust and the dangerous job of "bin diving" or "banjoing" to clean out the annex bins. Other topics discussed include handling different varieties of grain, interactions with the union, and pests and wildlife in the elevators.

Keywords: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Grain handling; Grain elevator explosions; Pool 4A explosion; Grain cleaning; Workplace accidents & injuries; Workplace fatalities; Boxcar shovelling; Grain screenings; Grain varieties; Grain elevators—equipment and supplies; Ship loading; Grain dust; Health & safety; Labour unions; Management; Foremen; Grain pests; Fumigation; Bin diving; SWP Pool 4A&B; SWP Pool 5; SWP Pool 6; SWP Pool 7A&B

Time, Speaker, Narrative
ID: Okay BS: This here is the seniority list of when I worked in the elevator. Here's when I started. ID: Oh, wow. Okay, let's just get started. Please start by giving your name and describing how you came to work in the grain industry.

BS: Okay. My name is Bob Speak. I started in a grain elevator in 1951. How I come to work there? I was working for Commonwealth Construction pushing a buggy of cement for a dollar an hour, and they offered me a job, 99 cents an hour. All I had was just a little sample scoop and a little sample dish, which didn't weigh 20 pounds compared to 150 pounds on the construction job. It was only a penny less than an hour, so I said, "Jeez, I got to go here! [Laughs] I ain't pushing that buggy of cement anymore!" So, I went there. I went in the morning. I went around 9:00. I seen Mr. Tenure [sp?] who was the superintendent then—or the general foreman. I can't remember which position he held, but anyways, he did the hiring.

They hired right in the elevator in them days. You went down there, they looked at you, they felt your muscles. [Laughs] If you could lift about 50 pounds, next, they'd hire you. So, he says to me, he says, "How old are you, son?" I says, "I'm 17." "Oh," he says, "You've got to be 18 to work in the elevator." I says, "Oh, okay." He says, "How old are you did you say?" I says, "I said I'm 18." "Can you start at noon?" "I mean, 12:00 today?" I said. He said, "Yep." I says, "I can start." So, I went home, had something to eat, put my old clothes on, went back, and I started there at noon.

ID: Do you remember what day that was? What date?

BS: Phew. It was August the 24th.

ID: Oh, you've got it in your sheet here, yes.

BS: Yes, it's in there. It's August 24th. I'm pretty sure it is. That's how I came to work in the elevator. Yeah, August 24, 1951, I started. At one time, Sask Wheat Pool had over 1,000 people on the seniority list, now they're down to about 80.

ID: And when you say Sask Wheat Pool, that would be all the Saskatchewan Pool elevators here?

BS: Yeah, yeah.

ID: Did you rotate, or did you work in one?

BS: I started at Pool 4A in Current River, then I went from 4A to 4B. Then I went way over to Westfort. Sask Wheat Pool has a Saskatchewan Wheat Pool No. 5 over there, and I worked over there for a while. Then I went to Pool 6, and I stayed there for about 20-25 years just in that one elevator. Then finally they closed that up, and I got shifted over to Pool 7. I was in management then, so I wound up at Pool 7B. Then they kept me there for maybe a year, and then I went over to 7A—one of the largest elevators in the world. It holds 12 million bushels of grain. Pool 4 was about 8 or 9,000 bushels of grain. Pool 6 was 6,000 bushels of grain. Then they sent me to Pool 7, and that's where I retired from in 1990. I spent most of my life--.

Then in 1952, I was at Pool 4A. Half the crew would work noon hour, the other half would get off. It was my unlucky day. It was my day to work and at 12:00, kaboom! The elevator blew up. I was standing on the cleaner deck talking to Harry Hanson—he's passed away now but. He went one way. The dust blew us just like somebody took a cigarette paper on your hand and just went *whoosh*, blew it off your hand. It just threw me up against the wall and filled my eyeballs up with dust. Then when I finally did get my bearing on what was happening, I wiped my hands, and the next thing you know I was in a wall of fire, walked around in a wall of fire maybe for 30 seconds. My ears were burning, my eyebrows were. In them days, you didn't wear a hardhat, you just wore mitts, eh? So, I had the mitts on the front of me trying to protect my face and then my ears. I'm back and forth.

[0:05:42]

In the meantime, I'm trying to get out of the elevator. I tried to get out through the door on the boat side, so I could jump in the water because my clothes are all on fire. The door, I couldn't get it open because the explosion jammed it shut so hard. They were big heavy-duty steel doors? It just jammed shut and I couldn't pull it open. I wasn't going to waste any time because then I went back the other way, and I bumped into this fellow, Steve. The two of us, we were running down the track and bricks were falling about 120 feet up, down. Bricks that you'd lay on the side of a house were falling from 120 feet up. They hit Steve—the guy running beside me—and threw him ahead of me, and peeled the back of his head back like a banana, you'd peel a banana. He just fell on the ground there and the bricks were coming. My hands were on my head. I just kept running because he was gone anyways. There was nothing you could do for him. If I'd stayed there, I'd have been buried too.

ID: Is that what happened? Did the roof fall in?

BS: Oh, the elevator blew, just blew up. I guess by the time we got out of there, everything was starting to come back down again. It was just like raining bricks. You didn't have much choice. If you stayed in the elevator, you'd fry to death. If you ran outside, you got killed by the bricks. You had a choice, which way you wanted to go. [Laughs] I took my chances running.

ID: How did you actually get out? Did you jump into the lake?

BS: No, I ran down to the, there was sort of an embankment, and that's how I broke my arm because there was grain doors there. Somebody was pick--. In them days, they used to take grain doors home and burn them for firewood, broken ones. I jumped on them when I was running down the bank, eh? The two boards with that grain in between was like bearings, and my feet just went out. They used to use four-inch spikes to put them in on the door. But it didn't go through my hand, it went through my mitt! But missed my hand and went through there, but that was the bad part because it anchored my hand down on the board. Then it just tore everything right around, right around. Come right around my arm. You could hear everything just ripping in there. I just grabbed my arm and I just kept running. Got up to the shack there, my clothes were burning a little bit. Then they took me to the hospital and cut all my--.

The only sad thing about it is I had my hockey jersey on. I was proud of that jersey and they bandaged it all up. I was lucky I got Dr. Baker. He was an army doctor from overseas. These other guys, they had doctors from here and they used ointment on their face. All he ever did to me

was tape up my face and my hands and everything, and then a nurse came in every hour and she watered them down, just soaked them down with water. Then when he cut it off, it was just like I had all new skin. That was the end of my explosion.

ID: What did the hospital look like? Were there lots of people?

BS: Yes. We had the whole one floor, all the one floor at the General Hospital. You couldn't find a mirror on that floor. They took every mirror out of there, so that I snuck down to the other floor to see what the hell I looked like. If you ever shave your eyebrows off, you would--. **[*…audio skips*]** It was an awful looking sight. [Laughs] But I got out of there alive.

ID: You're a lucky man!

BS: Yeah, yeah.

ID: How long had you been working there?

BS: Oh, I started in '51. One year.

[0:10:00]

ID: So, you'd been there about a year when it blew up?

BS: Yeah, yeah. About a year, yeah.

ID: We'll probably return to that because that's a huge event for the whole city, but can you just describe a routine worker day?

BS: Worker day?

ID: When would it begin?

BS: It started 8:00. You'd go in and you'd go in the—I worked on the cleaner deck—so I'd go in the cleaner deck office. The cleaner deck foreman—there'd be five cleaner men there and five shippers—and he'd say to the cleaner men, "You come ahead with bin 23 on your set. You have 27 on your set." He'd tell all the cleaner men--. **[*…audio skips*]** Ask the scale floor for a light. You had to have a light before you could put grain up the legs. So, they'd ask for a light on the 2, and then he'd give me a slip, and he'd say, "You go down in the basement, line all the belts up, and I want bin 548 up on 2." You got to go down on 9 and get it or 10 or 12 off the other way, and then you'd set the tripper so it goes on this belt or this one or this one. Whatever one you want, you can bring it up different ways.

ID: How would the cleaning machine work?

BS: How does the cleaning machine work? Well, first of all, when they unload the boxcar—I never worked in the car shed right away—when you unload a boxcar, in them days they shovelled it. They had two cables and a board. The board weighed about 35-40 pounds, and--. **[*…audio skips*]** It would trip the cable and it would come ahead. You just steered the grain until you got the whole boxcar. Took you about maybe 5 to 10 minutes to shovel one end. There was two guys in a boxcar, one on each end. You'd shovel.

ID: And they both had these boards?

BS: Yeah, you both had a board. About that size. Not quite that long, maybe 6 inches off, but about that size. It had handles on it and it had cable.

ID: So, you'd be hauling a couple hundred pounds of grain every time you.

BS: Well, you just more steered it because the cable on the bottom pulled.

ID: Who operated the cable?

BS: That was automatic up there.

ID: Okay.

BS: When you pulled it back too far it clicked in and it came ahead. Soon as you got to the back, you knew that was going to trip in up there and you got your foot away from the cable. One fellow didn't and it cut his foot off. You had to make sure you were on the other side of the board because when that cable--. **[*…audio skips*]** In the grain so you could get as much as you can to go out the door. Two of yous would come at the same time and you'd meet at the door. The grain would just pile up and go down onto the hopper. You did five cars in the morning—two guys—and then five cars after dinner. You did 10 cars and then you could go home. You'd start off in the morning with a parka, and you'd wind up with a t-shirt.

Then the grain would go into a hopper from the car and then there'd be a belt underneath there. The belt would take the grain, go up a leg, and the legs got buckets on it like that. The grain would go in, they'd fill the buckets, and they'd be going fast, eh, like 20 miles an hour going in there. Up it would go, and up to there, and it would go into what they called a garner. Then it would go in the garner, and the scale floor man would open the garner and they'd put it into the scale, balance the scale, weigh it--. **[*…audio skips*]** The car's lot, they'd close, shake the garner, close it, make sure nothing was in it, then they could give them a light for the next car. Then they'd be weighing this car.

Then, after it's weighed, then they'd put it into the spout. It would go down into the bin floor and they'd put it into bin 25 or 27, and that would be cleaner bin. Then they would clean it. It would go into the cleaners. There's usually four machines to a cleaner. It would take about 40 minutes to clean the car in them days, one side. And it would have to go back again a second time. Now, they got machines right now that will clean it all in 25 minutes, both sides. In them days, they didn't have it. They couldn't keep up to the cars that were coming in. They have been now, these machines that they got now.

[0:15:18]

ID: When you say cleaning, what exactly happens during the process? Are you cleaning dust out of it or something?

BS: They'd take the--. The only thing they throw away is the sticks, the stones, and the paper that comes out. When the grain's gone into the hopper after you've unloaded it, there's a big magnet. Nails, money, saws, hammers. Bing! Bing! Never gets to the elevator. That would go up. The sticks, they had what they would call scalpers on the top of the cleaners where the grain came through, and you had to clean that scalper out. The scalper was going around and around, and it would take the straw and throw it down into a bag. Down a spout and there was a bag hooked on there, straw bag we used to call them. They didn't throw--. **[*…audio skips*]** Boilers to dry the grain.

ID: Right. That's a separate process, is it, drying? It's a separate process from cleaning?

BS: Oh, yeah, all different, yeah. But anyways, then you'd get stones would come down there, sticks. Then coming out of the bottom of the machine, they'd have what they called the by-product, would be seeds and buckwheat and everything would come out of the grain, eh, take it out. They'd put that away too. Somewhere down the line somebody would buy it, or they'd give it to the farmers here or something.

ID: So, you'd do five cars per half shift, morning and afternoon?

BS: You'd shovel five cars in the morning, and you'd shovel five cars after dinner, and then you went home.

ID: When you got a car--. **[*…audio skips*]**

BS: And the inside door was like this across, the grain doors. You had to, when the car was coming in, they had like a big steel pole and it had jaws on this end. So, when they were pulling the car in, you just stuck that on the board, and—*puh!*—push it right in. That was at Pool 4, but then when I went to Pool 5. They didn't have that there. They had axes. You had to chop, and that was--. [Laughs] You were tuckered out by the time you got into the car, let alone do the car.

ID: It sounds like a really demanding, physical job.

BS: Oh, yeah. When I first started in the elevator, they weren't looking for anybody with BAs and DAs, they were looking for guys with a strong back and a weak mind. [Laughs] That's what they wanted. They wanted labourers. They didn't want--. Then in along 1970, all that shovelling was gone. They started using dumpers, and then now they've got the tankers that nobody has to do anything. The machine just automatically comes now and opens them up just with a push of a button.

ID: Yeah, I've seen that.

BS: Yeah. [Laughs] That's when they didn't come to feel your muscle anymore or take a look and see that you're physically fit. They just, "What education you got?" now. You know? In my experience, I worked in the grain elevator for 40 years, and I tell you some of the greatest guys that were ever foreman were the guys—and bosses—that actually did the job themselves. Then in the later years we started to get, what I used to call them was *wiz kids*. **[*…audio skips*]** Well, they could write. When we were in management, we used to have to do tests and that. Well, I'd take an hour, they'd take 10 minutes because they had the education! I never was very good at spelling. [Laughs] So, by the time I figured out how to spell that word, they had already did two or three lines!

[0:20:00]

But education took over because you didn't need anybody physically fit anymore after 1971. All them jobs were automatic, and they were going to the computer and everything else. See, my job for, oh I guess 15 years, was an estimator. I estimated all the bins and everything of how much grain. I'd fill out a sheet everyday how much--in them days they'd call it 1-Northern, 2-Northern, 3-Northern. Then now they've got into 1-Red 12.5, they've gone into the protein end of it.

ID: Oh, yes--. **[*…audio skips*]**

BS: 1-Northern, 2-Northern, 3-Northern, 4-Northern, 5-Wheat, 6-Wheat, and then different stuff like that. They changed it around.

ID: Just a silly little aside, but what would you do if you had a car full of barley?

BS: Car full of barley? You'd unload it.

ID: Didn't you find that that drove you crazy the--?

BS: Them little seeds? Oh, yes. Yeah. In them days, we never had showers at home. Never had showers in the elevator either. That was brutal. You'd be itching steady. Yeah. Barley was hard to shovel. Our barley was 1-Feed, 2-Feed, 3-Feed, and stuff like that. Canada Malt had the 2-Row and 3-Row barley. They had the better stuff, eh? We couldn't make beer with ours. We didn't pearl the barley. The barley just came in. We cleaned it. Canada Malt, they had the pearlers there. They could husk them, eh? Yeah, barley. Flax was actually the hardest to shovel.

ID: I gather they had to take special preparations for the boxcars also with oilseeds?

BS: Oh, yeah. They were all lined with paper. Yeah. That was a headache because the paper would tear when you were shovelling. Then it would get on the hopper and the hopper, you couldn't get it out of the hopper. You'd plug up the hopper. You'd have to quit shovelling, get down there, try to pull that paper out because it wouldn't run down. It was a challenge that flax.

ID: So, on the day that you started work, let's say—if we can go back there—how many people would have been in that elevator?

BS: How many?

ID: In fact, let's take--. **[*…audio skips*]** So, how many people would have been there?

BS: I guess, in that 4A, there'd probably—oh, let's see—probably about 35-40 people would've been working. In them days, they had lead bearings. They didn't have bearings like they have now, self-packing and that. Them bearings, they used to make them themselves in the wintertime. They'd pour the lead in there and make the bearings. You had to have an oiler, that was his job. He'd just go from one end of the elevator to the other, and by the time he got done there, he had to start over again and keep the bearings cool, because if they caught on fire, you might have another explosion.

So, they had an oiler. It was all kinds of positions in the elevator. **[*…audio skips*]** Foreman. Then you had in each department, like the cleaner deck, had a cleaner foreman and the scale floor had the scale-floor foreman. The annex, that's where the grain all went over to the annex to store. Big bins there, and you'd just put the grain there and they stored it. When a boat came, you opened it up, and it went up the legs again. They had an annex man. They had a grain inspector. He inspected the grain, and if he said it was no good, you'd shut the bin off, and you took another bin. That stuff that you ran up, they'd put it—instead of going to the boat—they'd swing the spout around back to the elevator and put it away in the annex or into a cleaner bin. That's why there--. **[*…audio skips*]** If you had a piece of paper, I could show you how that grain goes. I'll get a piece of paper. Just a minute. Because that's--. **[*…audio skips*]**

[0:25:03]

Or nothing, it was all by lights. Done by lights. So, then the scale floor, after he got all the grain out of the garner, he'd drop it into here, into the scale, weigh it. After it's all into the scale, he'd close the garner again, then he could give the guy a light here, and he could start coming with another car. Different grade. Different grade would be going in here, or sometimes the same grade but different weight. There was a government man up there to make sure that you didn't take any grain from this farmer to give it to that farmer because there could be two different farmers that shipped that grain. In this car, one farmer shipped it, next car might be another farmer. If you commingle them, he's not going to--. **[*…audio skips*]** That's all right. Now, it goes from here, it goes--. Down here they've got what they call a bin floor, got a bunch of bins. Over here is a belt. This here a spout. It can go either onto this belt, or it can go to any one of these bins. Okay?

ID: How big would the bins be?

BS: This bins here would hold five cars. Okay. So, they can go either into the bins, and underneath the bins is the cleaning machines. So, then you could open up, say you want--. These bins are all numbered—there's 25, 27, or something like that. So, the cleaner boss would say, "Open up bin 25." So, he'd open it up and it would go into this cleaner then, this grain that came out of here before into there from the scale. Now, if all these bins are full, then they'd put it over from here onto here. This goes over to the annex over here. This is your annex. They got another annex here—annex 1, 2, and 3 and so on. They've got big bins over here, all kinds of--. Running out of ink here. Then you'd just go, and they've got belts that go onto there. So, you could put it in any bin you want. Okay, this is the annex. From the scale it could either go into the house, it could go into there, or they could go here. Each scale. Here's your scales like this, these here, this looking from the top down, okay?

ID: How many cleaning machines?

BS: These are scales. How many? That would depend on the elevators. Some elevators had five, some had six. Average one would be about five sets of cleaners, four cleaners to each set. That would be it. Now, here's your scales, that's this here looking down at it. Here would be your boat. Now there's a spout comes out of here, goes into the hold on the boat. Comes out, goes into the hold on the boat. Okay? The grain trimmers, that, they load the boat from it. So, when you're running it from the basement then, you wouldn't be coming from here. You'd be coming--. This is a receiving leg. This receiving leg will hit this scale or it will hit another scale. It's the annex. From these annexes here, down in the basement. This is up above. Down below in the basement, they have belts that go, and they have a leg that goes up, same as this one here. That goes up and that goes this way, throws the grain this way into here, into this scale from the basement. You can open this bin or that bin or whatever you want. And each scale--.

[0:30:53]

ID: You know, it sounds like a lot of energy. It sounds like you've got a lot of machines running these belts and whatnot.

BS: Oh, yeah. There's big motors. They are big motors.

ID: What do they run on?

BS: Electricity.

ID: Electric?

BS: Yeah, yeah. See, this is in the basement. This is the basement belt. That's where I worked. So, I put the grain on 2 Shipper into-- This would be 2 here. I opened the bin, and the belt was about this wide, and you had to--. In them days, they didn't have gauges or nothing to tell you how much grain to put on this belt so you didn't plug this leg. You did it with the feel of your hand. You knew that if the grain was hitting

up here, you had too much grain. The belt was going by, you'd stick your hand in the grain, with the grain, and it would tell you. Then you would go up to the front, and they had a canvas thing there, and you opened it up and you could see. If the grain was in the buckets and nothing was falling back, you didn't have enough. You had to go open that bin a little more. Then you'd go give it some more of this. Then you'd go up to the front. Then you'd see the grain slightly coming back, you know it's getting overloaded. But if it was really coming back, you'd run like hell to shut the bin off because you're going to plug this. It would plug.

ID: Who was the person then that made these measurements and calculations? Were you doing that?

BS: What, the--?

ID: To see if there was enough or too much?

BS: Yeah, that's what I was. I was the shipper in the basement. That's how the grain got from the bottom of the annexes. The scale would put it over to the annex and it would also put it onto the boat. See, here's your scales here. These scales are the same scales. Not the same scale, on the same scale floor. See, the elevator was like this. Here's your boxcar. Then from there, you had what they called a bin floor and then you had the bunch of money makers. Money makers, why they called them money makers was because they took all the buckwheat out and sorted the buckwheat from the rapeseeds. Well, they call it the canola now, but. All that stuff was sorted out right on this floor. Then they had another floor above that, and then you had your scale floor. Up here was your garners, all up in there. Scale floor. See?

ID: So, on the day that it blew up, where were you? Do you know what exactly happened?

BS: No, I don't know what happened. All I know is that the elevator blew up. I know where I was. This is the cleaner deck here. Right in here. The elevator looked like this. The scales were going, things were going out onto the boats, to the boat.

[0:35:23]

ID: Yeah, from the newspaper report, there was a ship.

BS: Yeah. The *Bayton*, I think it was. One of these scales that blew out, blew the whole side of the elevator. You could still see it if you went down to Pool 4. You can see where they patched it up. It blew this out. There was a guy sitting in there—it blew him out and right onto the deck of the boat. He was eating his lunch. It was his last meal. But anyways, it blew it out onto there from there. But that's how it works. It comes out of the boxcar, into this hopper, up this belt, up this leg, into this garner. Then it's into the scale, they close this back up, and give them another light so they can start this up again. The basement is altogether belts underneath everything, big slides and that.

ID: So, this system can only handle five cars in the morning and five in the afternoon, is that right?

BS: On one track.

ID: Okay. How many in a shift? How many boxcars?

BS: See, like Pool 5 had just two tracks, so you did 10 cars in the morning and 10 cars in the afternoon. That's 20 cars. But Pool 4, they could do—let's see, 10, 20, 30—40 cars a day they could do because they had four tracks shovelling. They could have a gang on every track. But when you get into a small place like--. **[*…audio skips*]** Unless they put another gang on, but then they couldn't get rid of them fast enough. The scale floor couldn't handle it.

ID: Yes, exactly. So, everything is dependent on how fast the system moves.

BS: Yeah. Like Pool 6 now, they had four hoppers there, four of these. But they didn't shovel. Well, they did shovel, but it was before my time. They were mostly dumpers that tipped the car up and down, shook it out that way. First, the car it would come up onto the thing and then the dumper would tip this way, and then it would go down. Then an automatic slide would go in there. So, the slide would go in so when it went down this way it would go out that way. Then it would start to go the other way, that slide would come out, another slide from this way would go in and get the grain from the other side. [Laughs] [Inaudible] was one of the guys that--.

ID: Would you have been working in dust? Was there a lot of dust?

BS: [Coughs] Are you kidding? [Laughs] It was so thick at times you could--. See, when I first started in the elevator there was no such thing as a spout from the ceiling to the floor. We just used to line up the little wee short spout, open the bin, and it would fall right from the ceiling right down and into the grate. There was dust. *Whoomp!* I was in the annex at Pool 6, and they were all open bins. There was no floor! The grain went down into the bin, and it just came back up. If you had eaten soup, you had to make damn sure you could eat fast, or you'd be getting barley and your soup would be thick by the time you got finished with it! [Laughs]

ID: With all this machinery flying around, it sounds like safety would be a big concern.

BS: Safety never come into any effect until after the 1952 explosion. At 4B, they did do a lot for safety then. But then after the 1952 explosion, then they really got serious about that screenings. They call the dust the screenings, and they never loaded it into boats. Maybe they did the odd one after that, but not too much. It all went into a little sort of a hopper, and it was trucked to Pool 7 and made into pellets. They ground it up into pellets, and I don't know who ate it. The pigs I guess. I don't know. Somebody got it. That's what they did with the screenings. Like I said, they only threw away the sticks, the stones and the paper.

[0:40:25]

[Audio pauses]

ID: Start again. **[*…audio skips*]** Did you have **[*...audio skips*]** with unions during your career, particularly again in the earliest early days?

BS: With the local 650? Yeah, I was with the union right up until I got into management. The union was good. It had its good points, and it had its bad points, but it was good, kept the management honest, you know. Or else they could just do whatever they wanted. Union kept them fairly honest. The elevator always was a fairly good paying job. Yeah, it was. When the years of the drying—when the grain from out west came in all wet and that—well, they ran them dryers three shifts all winter long. **[*…audio skips*]** You load the boat and here was these dryers running, but they split it up too amongst the men. The union was good that way. It protected a lot of good workers, and it protected a lot of doggers too. But it worked. It will all balance out that way anyways. You're never going to get it all one way anyways. But it was good that way. The union was good for the men. It was good for the company too in a way. I was on a couple of strikes. It was good. Sort of like an extra paid holiday, but you didn't get paid.

ID: Do you remember when and what was the issue and how did it all work out?

BS: Well, it was mostly for wages and pension. We were always fighting for our pension. We were lucky that most of the guys that worked there when I worked there, they all got their pensions. The management, you paid into a different fund and that. So, it was good.

ID: You have no complaints overall?

BS: Overall, if I had to do it again? I would do it again! The only thing is I almost lost my life when I was 17 years old. [Laughs] It was close. [Laughs] But it was good. You got a bunch of good guys to work with. You get a few cranky buggers, and a few wiz kids came in there later on. Other than that, it was good.

ID: So, the culture of the place, it was a good place to go to work?

BS: Well, yes, yes it was. Yeah, it was a good place. It was dusty, but then in them days, after work you finished your job after eight hours, you stopped at the pub and had a couple of pints of ale and washed all that dust down. **[*…audio skips*]** Or whatever and--.

ID: This is a particular interest to me because, talking to you and other people, I'm becoming aware of the number of hockey players that grew up here in the elevator system. I guess being in the NHL wasn't like the Staals is today. You didn't get millions of dollars, so you had to combine your play and your work.

BS: Yeah, oh yeah. We went to work a few times hungover, but we did our job. Shovelled our ten cars and went home. Sweated, suffered. Went back the next Friday and probably did the same stupid thing again.

ID: How long were shifts?

BS: Eight hours. Then if you went back after supper for another three hours, you went back from 6:30 to 9:30. For another three hours of overtime. That was overtime then, time and a half. But wages were always good. I found them good, you know, compared to the--.

[0:45:13]

ID: Do you remember what they were, let's say, for a week or an hour?

BS: Well, when I started it was 99 cents an hour.

ID: Right.

BS: Yeah, and then when I retired, I believe they were getting $18.00 an hour.

ID: To start?

BS: Well, it all depends where you started. Yeah, yeah roughly. That was that in there. I think when I retired, I think the lowest wage was $17.00 an hour. Now they got all different categories. [Papers fall] I didn't do it! [Laughs] But anyways, yeah. When I got into management, they asked me to go into management, I said I had about 15 years--. **[*…audio skips*]** Management gets a better pension, so I said, "Well, I better make a run for it." So, I went into management.

I found it harder working just in management to have the final say of what's going to happen. Before there was always somebody up before made the final decision for me, but then when I got into management they would say, "You've got to make it now." I thought I did a good job anyways. I got my job done. I went home. See, when you're loading them boats, if the government says it's no good, there's $180,000 shipment on that boat that the government says is no good. The next morning your big boss from uptown is phoning down. "What's going on?"

ID: Did that ever happen to anybody?

BS: To me! I went--. **[*…audio skips*]** Better have a third or I won't sleep. But anyways, the next morning the boss phoned me, "What's going on? The shipment's turned down." I says, "I'm telling you, sir, it's not turned down. It's good. I know it's good." "Well," he says, "if we ship it down east and it's still no good, you know what's going to happen, eh?" I said, "I don't know. I'm telling you right now, it's good. Ship it down east and have it re-sampled again from them down there, because this guy who turned it down, I think he's a little bit high society," and I said, "That ain't high society grain we put on there, so." Anyways, they shipped it down east and it was good. But I had to wait a week. Every night lying there well, "Is this going to be good?" $180 000, that's a lot of money. One of the foremen said it was good, and they shipped it down there and it was no good. They said there was heated oats, and the foreman says, "There's no heated oats in it." They shipped it down there and it was heated oats.

ID: What is heated oats?

BS: Heated oats is when it's starting to go bad. That's the easiest way to explain it. It's got heat in it, and it's not--. They asked for 3 CW oats, and you give them heated oats. It's not very good. So, that grain sat there for about five years before somebody finally bought it. They had to pay storage on it and everything.

ID: How long does grain keep?

BS: How long? Whew. It all depends on the climate, eh? If you've got the right climate, they can probably stay in there for 10 or 15 years. But if it's damp, you know, or it's really hot.

ID: Could those conditions be--. **[*…audio skips*]**

BS: Them elevators, in the basement you could go there right until August and it would be this temperature right here, right now. In August! Everybody outside would be walking around in a t-shirt, and I'd have a jacket on down there singing to the rats and the mice.

ID: Well, that's a question too. I'd like to just jump back and think about cleaning again. You've told me most of the residues. What happens to pesticides?

[0:50:10]

BS: Pesticides? That's out west.

ID: Okay. So, when the grain gets here it has no pesticides?

BS: Well, not that I know of. Well, they could've had it put in out there, but we never--.

ID: But it isn't a pollution problem.

BS: We had to, with some kind of bugs in them or something, but we had--. I forget this guy's name, but he used to come in and do it anyways. He fumigated the bins, and they'd seal the lid all up and everything so it couldn't get out. They'd leave it for a week and then you could, what they call turn it over. They just run it down over the belt and back up and right back in the bin again, just to air it out. Then they would sample it and see if the little termites are dead or they're alive or what. If they were dead, or if they found one live one, they'd fumigate it again. Then when they were dead, they would take them, and we used to call them monitor. It shook like this, and the grain would go down and they'd fall through the holes, eh? The bugs and that would just—*pachoo!*—keep going. They'd put it over the monitors, air it out, and away they go.

ID: You mentioned another--. **[*…audio skips*]** Tell me about rats.

BS: [Laughs] Rats? They had rats down at Pool 4 the size of cats. Cats! The biggest. I tell you, boy, they weren't scared of you. I give one a kick in the ass one day. He flew about 15 feet. He turned around, he chattered his teeth, looked at me, and charged towards me! I jumped up on the top of the hood there and sat there. [Laughs] He was down below. [Chattering sounds] Oh, was he mad. [Laughs] They were big!

ID: So, there are rats then?

BS: Oh! Pool 6 at night, down near the grain door shack, the whole ground would move. I don't know who complained, but the City had to come in and exterminate.

ID: Did they ever get control of that problem?

BS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. [Inaudible] They go all over the place. Yeah, they were good. Mice, the only thing with mice you ever had was they come in the boxcars. You open the boxcar up and they come out with the grain. That's where they come from. Out west! I don't know how they got in the cars there, but they got in somehow.

ID: Pigeons too, speaking of wildlife.

BS: Pigeons? Annex. Up in the annex there was lots of pigeons.

ID: So, it sounds like it would be a constant battle to keep clear of the products created by these animals, apart from anything else, like rats.

BS: No, we didn't have that much problem. In fact, it was the later years that they started getting rid of them. You'd be walking down the belt and you'd see a rat or something. Nine times out of ten they would take off.

ID: What might interest or surprise people the most about the work that you did?

BS: Handling the dust! Most people would never, wouldn't even want to be in there.

ID: Did you have masks or respirators or anything?

BS: We had masks, but I never wore them. Like I said, I just go home and have a couple of beer and wash it all down. [Laughing] She's going to go somewhere! The only time I'd wear a mask is if I had to go down and clean the screening tank.

ID: What did that involve?

BS: You're going in another area here again. They're about the size of this whole room, and it's 100 feet up. You'd sit in a chair like this, in a chair, and you'd hang on. They'd lower you down through a little trap door in the top of the bin. You'd sit in that chair and the chair sometimes would spin. You'd get dizzy, but you hung on. They had a little flimsy harness used to go through the things here so you couldn't fall out of the chair, but the cable was only about that thick. The chair would be built like that and the cable would be up there. They'd wind you down.

[0:55:38]

Three guys on top, one guy down in the chair. You'd go down that 90 feet, 95 feet. Then the screenings would be hung up. You'd have a big pole, and you'd be poking at it to get it to go down through the hole. You'd poke it and then you'd bounce back that way. [Laughs] You'd take a run at it and, ping! There'd be a light down there, and you can't see because the dust, once it gets into that hole, there's an updraft. You could barely see what you were doing. It was a terrible job, that. Yeah, that was cleaning them screening bins. But it still wasn't as hard as shovelling 10 cars. That was a job in itself.

ID: So, those screens were at the bottom of the silo?

BS: The screenings? Yeah. The bottom of the bin went like that into a hopper like that.

ID: And it's 95 feet tall?

BS: Yeah, 95 to 100 feet high.

ID: And how--. Circumference?

BS: Well, it would hold 10 boxcars, 10 of them tankers. With screenings, when they used to have screenings in them bins—they don't put them in there no more. It wouldn't all run out, and it would be hung up on the sides. So, you'd have to go down there and sometimes get out of the chair and go and poke. It wasn't very safe. Then when we went to Pool 6, you had to banjo them.

ID: I've heard that term before. Banjo.

BS: Pool 6, the bottom of their bins wasn't hoppered. It was flat like this table, so you had a hole way over there. So, you had two guys, and there was a steel thing like this with two handles like this. One guy on that side, one guy on this side. Together you'd grab it, put it in there, and pull it towards--. Throw it to the hole. That was banjoing.

ID: Yeah, that's described to me by several people who didn't stay with the elevators, but they were workers for a while.

BS: Yeah, you had to banjo them. That was a job in itself.

ID: Ron Christianson, he was one who spent a couple of summers, and he described that to me for the first time. It sounds pretty--.

BS: But you know how you got down in the bin? You went on a ladder! The ladder was on the side of the tank. You would run up and down there like a monkey. In them days, they didn't have safety harnesses. Nothing! You just went down there, and when you got to the bottom--. The banjo would always be down there. They'd lower that down in case it came up. It'd cut you in half if it ever fell on you. But anyways, it was always down there and the light, and then you went down on the--. You'd grab them rungs, and some of them would move! [Laughs] Like you're going backwards. It'd scare you. It's scary! A lot of guys wouldn't go. They quit right there. You'd tell them, "You've got to go down in the bin." "No!" "That's part of your job." "Well, I quit." And they quit.

ID: Were there a lot of accidents?

BS: Guys had not fallen down in the bin. There was a lot of guys got hurt down in the bins, yeah. Mostly pulled muscles. Mostly. Back, you know, because that was hard work.

ID: I heard a case, I think, within the last two years in Manitoba, "64-year-old farmer drowned in a grain bin."

BS: Oh, yeah. Our bins though, I don't know, they weren't ventilated, but--. I don't know. They opened them up, the lids anyways, so you could smell if anything was heating down there. If it was heated grain, they wouldn't put you down there because it was fermenting, eh? It was like a gas. You wouldn't go down.

[1:00:27]

ID: What would be the procedure? Let's say a bin is discovered to be heating.

BS: They wouldn't put you down there. They'd pull it out. They would pull it from the bottom, and if anything did stick on the walls then they'd take--. I don't know. Somebody would come and say, "Well, there's not enough gas in there to hurt you," or something, and you'd go down. But otherwise, most of the time they were okay.

ID: So, it was just a matter of pulling it out and drying it let's say.

BS: No, just airing it. See, when they pulled it out, it's got to go from here out of this bin. It's got to probably travel down to the lake by the time it gets all the way around on all the belts and the legs and everything. It's pretty well aired out by the time it goes back again. Then, if it's not, they would put it over a monitor—that one that goes like this—and they would shake it and thin it all out and air it out.

ID: Well, that's one hour, so what I'd like to do is just shut it down now and maybe come back in the fall because I'm going to know a lot more and I will have more--.

BS: You should take this stuff with you, if you want, and read up on it.

ID: Well, I would--.

End of Interview.