

Narrator: Peter Stevenson (PS)

Company Affiliations: Day Company of Canada, Vulcan Machinery

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Interviewer: Ernie Epp (EE)

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Summary: Sheet metal worker and machinist Peter Stevenson discusses his year and a half of work in the 1940s in the Thunder Bay terminal elevators as an assistant installing dust collection equipment. Stevenson describes the flow of grain through a terminal elevator, the amount of grain dust kicked up into the workplace, and the dangers this dust could pose. He describes the dangerous working conditions in the elevator and some near accidents he almost had. Stevenson surveys the terminal elevators he worked in across the waterfront, noting unique features of design or major events that happened there, like the annex collapse at UGG A and the workhouse sinking at Alberta Pool 9. Other topics discussed include war distress storage, move to machinist work with Vulcan Machinery, fond memories of his colleagues and elevator workers, activities as a youth growing up in Westfort, and scuba diving around the elevator slips.

Keywords: Day Company of Canada; Sheet metal work; Skilled trades; Trades work; Dust control; Dust control equipment; Grain elevator disasters; Grain elevator explosions; Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Elevator 4B explosion; Grain elevator accidents; Grain dust; Thunder Bay terminal grain elevators; Labour unions; C. D. Howe Company; War distress storage; Vulcan Machinery; Health and safety; Grain elevator equipment and supplies; Automation; Northwestern Elevator; Reliance Elevator; Paterson Elevator; Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator (Cargill Elevator); Searle Elevator; Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Elevator 7; Richardson Elevator; United Grain Growers Elevator A; UGG A annex collapse; Empire Elevator; Alberta Wheat Pool Elevator 9; CPR Elevator D; Westfort; Kaministiquia River; Fort William; Port Arthur; Current River

Time, Speaker, Narrative
OM: There.
EE: Well, it's a pleasure to be meeting with you, Peter, in this kind of a context. So perhaps we can start by my asking you to give your name for the purposes of the recording.

PS: Okay. I'm Peter Patrick Stevenson.

EE: And then describe--. I guess in your case you never worked in the--. You didn't work in the grain industry through your whole life. So maybe what we should do instead is I might ask you when you first did work that related to the grain industry in the city.

PS: A year and a half from 1947 to '48. In '47 and '48 completed--. No, not quite. A year and a half in the two years.

EE: Within '47 and '48?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Now, you've indicated that your birthdate was 1931.

PS: '31.

EE: So you were about 16 or 17 when this--.

PS: Yeah.

EE: So this was only perhaps your first job, in fact, was it?

PS: Well, no. I worked a year a year at Northern Wood before that at 16.

EE: Okay. Right. In the Depression circumstances, you were out there earning some money. Well, by that time, it's after the war, I guess.

PS: Yeah.

EE: Right. Had anyone in your family been connected with the grain industry earlier?

PS: No.

EE: Your father hadn't or anything of that sort?

PS: No.

EE: So we have that particular year, and you might then tell us who did you work for during this time?

PS: In this--?

EE: In this '47-'48 period.

PS: Okay. I got a job with Day Company of Canada, a giant sheet metal company, and they had the contract to do the elevators, put the dust control. And they really—when I came—they started a couple years already, they'd been in it, but what I gathered they wanted to finish it up a little more, so they brought in a lot of crew helpers. And with the sheet metal men, I was the helper, and we always had six, seven men in this elevator, so much in this, and so much--. Almost going the odd elevator. Then some then sent a big group to do this elevator from top to bottom because it's been laid last or so, you know.

EE: Sure. So if this was happening in 1947 and, you said, a year or two earlier, the big explosion was in August of 1945 at Pool--.

PS: Yeah. I think that's pretty close to--.

EE: And I suppose that's what got the elevator companies realizing that they needed to do something to clean up their terminals, was it?

PS: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: Do you remember the explosion? Were you anywhere around?

PS: No, but my next-door neighbour on Alexander Street, Fort William, worked there. He worked for the grain doors division, which were some big crews. Remember the old boxcars had the grain doors inside to keep the pressure and that?

EE: Right.

PS: He went to the hotel up the hill for a beer and overstayed his--.

EE: Shift?

PS: His time in the hotel.

EE: Or his break.

PS: When he came back, the elevator had already blown up that section. So he said, "Lucky I was in that beer parlour because I wouldn't have been around." [Laughing]

EE: So it could have killed him, the way it--?

PS: Well, you know, that's what he said. [Laughing]

EE: Well, there are many reasons to be thankful for another beer, but it's hard to top that one. [Laughing] And so with this experience--. In any case, you were then hired by the Day Company, was it?

PS: Yeah. They needed young guys for--. I wanted to learn a trade and sheet metal, well, was more available. With them guys, with so much young guys working, you could get in. I got in through some friends that spoke up for me. So you were a helper, and originally you was at the shop for about a month and a half or two, soldering and helping the sheet metal men hold the pipe and what have you. And then gradually, you get sent to the elevators to work. The elevators, to work there, was Siberia when you went in the fall because it is the most coldest place to work in. The windows are all open. After that, they were all open in order to keep the draft going, you know? But you had to have all the clothes you owned on to survive. It was terrible.

[0:05:11]

EE: And you were working through the winter of '47-'48.

PS: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: Did they do more of the work in the elevators after the end of the shipping season then, which would--?

PS: Well, through--. It goes on. It doesn't affect them whether it's shipping season or not.

EE: They were at work getting this stuff in.

PS: Yeah. The grain seemed a lot of it would come here, some of it was cleaned here or whatever and then boxcars--.

[Telephone rings]

EE: You can shut that--.

[Audio pauses]

OM: Wait for your cue, Ernie.

EE: Yes, sir. You were just saying about the grain coming into the elevators that--.

PS: That's when--. How do you say it? You know, the railway tracks, everything was manual labour to unload the boxcars. Some of them had screens like--. What's the word? In the tracks there was openings that the grain could go down.

EE: Fell down into bins under the track, I suppose.

PS: Well, under there, and under belts would be taking to the workhouse and then up the workhouse to the top and then over to the bins, you know?

EE: Okay. Right.

PS: Those days, the bin was from the floor up, it was almost 100 feet, and the old-style wooden boxcars, they could hold 40 boxcars.

EE: These are the big concrete silos that you're describing, these round bins at the terminals.

PS: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: 40 boxcars, eh?

PS: Yeah. And underneath the silo, of course, was coned, and when they were needed to load a ship, it all went--. The guy with the screw opens a hatch, the wheat goes down the belt, down the conveyor, up again to the weigh staff and samplers, and then over, and then to the spout into the hull of the ship. And dust, dust, dust because of all that traffic of movement of grain.

EE: Now, that's a very useful description of how the grain actually moved from the boxcar into the silos, into the bins, and back out, and so on. And you were just referring to all the dust that blew around. What were you actually doing then? What did the dust control equipment, the installations that you were carrying out, actually involve and do to this?

PS: Well, they were trying to keep the air clean because from me to the refrigerator sometimes when they're working loading a ship and all the machinery's working to take the grain up and the whole thing, you could just see a silhouette of that person.

EE: At three or four metres.

PS: Eh?

EE: At three or four metres, let's say, or a dozen feet.

PS: Yeah. It was so bad, the dust, you know? So gradually as more--we called them cyclones--. They had them up on the building and sucked the dust up. And then the heavier stuff went down the cyclone in a pipe, and it would be gone to another bin, and it was sold for chicken mash.

EE: Right. Oh, yes.

PS: As a by-product. But it did tone down the dust control because you were just covered in dust. And the odd time you put a hankie over the face because no breathers were available.

EE: Yeah. No masks.

PS: No.

EE: Were available at the time. So you were involved, then, in the installation of these huge vacuum cleaners, I suppose, in a sense.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

EE: Or vacuum extractors. And the piping that you were putting in, the sheet metal was, what, around the vacuums and in the pipes up?

PS: All kinds. The pipes were all over the place. Some of them, to have movement, they had slip joints where you can pull it to here and suck up or go here and suck up the dust. The other thing was, for us, you had to go crawl in the beams there and all the ironwork to put the pipe through. The dust on there, my God, if the guy's working on top over there, and he brushes his foot or something, all that stuff comes down on you, you know?

[0:10:08]

EE: It just piled up on every level surface, I suppose.

PS: Yeah. And cold. Very cold, you know, in the draft—and dangerous. It was quite dangerous. I mean, three times I was this close to being killed.

EE: In what ways?

PS: Well, one of the times, the elevators that hoisted you, they were manual big ropes. So what happened used to be the guys would pull it and kind of slow down, and you opened your door and jump into the elevator and keep on going.

EE: Oh, jolly good. [Laughing]

PS: This was all *buh-buh-buh*, you know? So this time we were going from way up, down. So the elevator came, and I was to jump in with the rest of the guys, but they felt I wasn't going to make it so they're pulling me back, but the guys in the elevator are pulling me in to get--. So the elevator did manage to stop right here, and I was laying across from the floor and part into the elevator.

EE: Oh, yeah. It could've just chopped you in two or done grave damage.

PS: Yeah, that's what it would've done. Would've crushed me to death.

EE: I see. So that's--.

PS: That was one. [Laughs] And another one, I was to fall off holding this piping, and the guy is riveting it and ready to fall off onto the belt. Well, the belt is going, well--. Cripes! You know? If I get caught in one of the downspouts, well, this belt would wear down, and I would have to either try to fall off or somebody yank me off the belt. So that was--. But somehow, we got used to that, and really--.

EE: People do.

PS: Get shook up for a minute or two, but after that, well, it's just one of those things. It's like--. [Laughing] When I got older, I thought, "Oh my God!"

EE: But it didn't encourage you to think about a lifetime in the elevators, I don't suppose.

PS: No. With the allergy and stuff I had and work in that kind of an environment, no. You know, I didn't quit. I got laid off, a group of us, once they caught up. But I felt--. I got in for a while working with a guy that put furnaces in, sheet metal part of it, you know?

EE: Sure.

PS: That was a lot better.

EE: In the elevators as well?

PS: No, no. Another--.

EE: Oh, this was--. So you continued with the company, and--.

PS: Well, no. Not the company. Small sheet metal outfits in town.

EE: With a skilled sheet metal worker.

PS: Day Company was good in one way. Once you were working there, you worked eight hours. With a sheet metal shop, you only worked when you got a customer to buy a furnace. So you could hang around the office for two or three or four hours. If there's no work, you don't get paid.

EE: Only if there's work being done, eh?

PS: Yeah. Small sheet metal outfits couldn't afford to pay you all day, you know? So you hung around until hopefully a call would come in, and then the sheet metal guy and me, the helper, go down and--. Back to the grain trades. The thing, too, I noticed was that it was one hell of a lot of men. Like, each one.

EE: In each elevator?

PS: Each elevator. Then come the grain trimmers and come the government staff men and the weighmen, you know?

EE: The inspectors and so on, weighmen.

PS: And everyone had their kind of purpose or positions and that. And it was a job that employed a lot of people, and a lot of them worked for many years there. Like it wasn't a place where you're going to get laid off in six months or what have you, except some in the winter months. Some of them did tone down the crew or shorten because it was just strictly now carloads coming in, carloads going out, whereas with shipping, of course, carloads are coming in and loading the bins for the--. The ship is--. One come in and two or three days later, another one comes in at your elevator, and so on and so on.

EE: Were you a member of the union during this time?

PS: Yeah, yeah. That was one of the good things about it was that, you know, the guy calls you and said, "There's going to be a night school course that was then the Fort William Vocational for sheet metal." And I says, "Well, what do I have to do?" Well, he says, "You go down there and sign yourself in, because you've got to take sheet metal drafting, how to make patterns, stuff and that." Well, I didn't really want to do that. "Well," he says, "if you want to work with us, you're going to school." So there was four or five of us guys. The union's telling you, "You're going to school."

[0:15:35]

EE: Well, this would be in the best traditions of the old craft unions--.

PS: That's what it was.

EE: Where a skilled trade was what the workers were.

PS: Yeah. And the point is, "If you're going to work with us, you've got to start learning skills." And I figured, well, I guess I have to because that's how he did it. Well, the night school guys were senior guys at sheet metal and show you the tricks of a lot of techniques and that, which was not--. You know, there was a lot to learn.

EE: Did you work as a sheet metal worker for a while then?

PS: Well--.

EE: Just to jump ahead. We'll come back to the elevators again.

PS: Yeah. I worked at Day Company for a month and a half then sent to the elevator.

EE: Right. Still working for the Day Company, though?

PS: Day Company. [**Telephone rings**] Jesus!

[**Audio pauses**]

OM: Okay. Here we go. She should've spent more time in caucus.

EE: So you were saying in terms of working as a sheet metal worker, you were working at the Day Company headquarters, I guess, or at their plant first and then off to the elevators.

PS: Yeah, to work with the guys there who are from the Day Company, and some of them had been there months, you know, so they're sending new guys to help.

EE: Were these men coming in from Toronto or wherever, some of these?

PS: No. The guys that were here that I remember had been a year or two before I came. So it was a good steady job. So they--.

EE: But they were Lakehead men who had these jobs?

PS: Yeah. Some were brought in from somewhere else, but very few. And the other thing, once they got with this elevator stuff, you have to, I guess, give credit to C. D. Howe because his engineering firm organized to get this dust control done. So guys were sent from here, some veterans, to Alberta, to elevators there, to Saskatchewan, Manitoba.

EE: Did you have any sense that there was government money supporting this work?

PS: Well, I think so because C. D. Howe then was the minister of--. Oh.

EE: Probably Trade and Commerce.

PS: Yeah.

EE: He was also Minister of Defense Production, I know, in there. There's this joking about "Minister of Everything." [Laughs]

PS: He was here, Mr. Everything.

EE: And, of course, member of parliament for Port Arthur, so.

PS: From 1935 to--.

EE: 1957.

PS: Until Doug Fischer beat him, yeah.

EE: The reason I'm asking is I was chatting this morning with someone who was involved with some similar work in the mid-'70s or late '70s. And he suggested that a substantial amount of money had been given to the elevator companies for further, I guess, maybe the dust control and so on, and probably upgrading that may well have displaced workers as well, although he didn't say that in so many words. So that made me wonder, if that happened in the '70s whether back in '47-'48 there was any public money in there.

PS: I think so because if you remember, you'll see cement floors outside of the elevators—back of the elevators—and they built big wooden structures to store wheat in there.

EE: Annexes.

PS: Richardson Elevator in Current River and those, they had them out back. Part of it was for the war effort, at least I was told. In case a disaster happened, they wanted—particularly central where we were in North America—that the German planes wouldn't reach us this far. That was the other consideration was keep the odd ones on the coast, but you want everything inland.

[0:20:04]

EE: Right. In safety.

PS: They built those with thick walls of wood, BC fir lumber. And I'm sure the government put that all out because the elevators wouldn't have done that, you know?

EE: There was a lot of annex building on the Prairies in these years as well, I think. There's more grain being grown, I suppose. Rather than adding to the size of the elevator itself or building more, they just added these annexes. That may have had something to do with the difficulties of selling all the stuff in the 1950s, though, I think on the Prairies, which gets us in another story we better not try telling here.

PS: Yeah.

EE: I was asking you whether you'd continued to work as a sheet metal worker for some time, then, after this work was done.

PS: I was about a couple of months working for this guy where you come there, and if there's work you stayed. If there wasn't, you hung around. And I got tired of that. That's when I went in the summer of 1950 to Vulcan Machinery.

EE: So you started with Vulcan in 1950 already.

PS: It was then called Twin City Industrial.

EE: Okay.

PS: It was the International Harvester dealership. They had opened in '47, and I came in 1950, and I was there 40 years with that. That was at least steady more. Like the Day Company now had pretty well tied up all the elevators, and from then on, Northland Machinery was a company over by where the Italian Hall, Da Vinci Hall is, further down. The guy was quite famous here. He donated a lot of money for scholarships. Passed away. He was not quite to the Paterson level, but he was--.

OM: Andrews, John Andrews?

PS: Yeah.

EE: John Andrews?

PS: John Andrews.

EE: Ah, yes. The Andrews Foundation and the Thunder Bay Foundation, in fact, is where his money went.

PS: They took up the slack. In fact, they worked at times when we were there, and then they kind of—after a while when Day Company moved to big jobs west and east and take some of the crew with them there—they kind of pick up the scraps here and plug along.

EE: Work in the elevators?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Not necessarily this dust control work, but other work as well.

PS: Whatever, yeah.

EE: Needed to be done.

PS: It was kind of like--. How do you say? They had a lot of what you call black iron work, and that is the big heavy spouts and that and rivets on the side. Before that, on Fort William Road there's the bus depot there.

EE: By the Intercity area, near the bus garage?

PS: Yeah. Next to there was Holmes Sheet Metal. Now, they were the pioneer of the sheet metal stuff. And the journeyman that I was helper, he was 54, which to me at 17, 18 was an old man. But he worked as a young man for Holmes Sheet Metal there, and he told me--. I said, "Well, why'd they put it on the Fort William Road like that?" He says, "Well, the elevators were over there and," he says, "we would make the spouts, and by team horses wheel them through the field there and over the railway tracks to the elevators to put all those big spouts and all that." It was all manual work. So that was back, I guess, in the '30s when this was happening. Or even sooner.

EE: When the elevators were being added to, or even earlier. Yes. Yes, I daresay.

PS: Yeah. Or earlier, you know?

EE: Yeah. I don't suppose anyone connected with that business is alive by now--this Holmes Sheet Metal--people connected with that will long since be gone.

PS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Because, well, Jack was 54 and I was 17, 18.

EE: 54 and 47--. 18--. Well, 93 or something like that.

PS: Yeah.

EE: Yeah, he'd be 117 by now if he were still with us.

PS: Yeah. He was the best guy I worked for. He was patient with me and took me over as a grandson type of deal. That was good. The other guys were, well, it was like a football team. You towed the mark or get out type of mentality or something.

[0:25:06]

EE: And did you work for this--. What did you say the man's name was?

PS: Jack--.

EE: Should really memorialize him in this recording if we could.

PS: I think it was Jack Weeks. And Weeks had a store at Kakabeka in the old days of corner farmers' store, and he was part of that family.

EE: Well, we can track him down in the old city directories for that matter to find a Jack Weeks and confirm that he was a sheet metal worker.

PS: Yeah.

EE: And you worked with him quite a bit on this?

PS: Yeah. I worked with him, oh, about five, six months. Well, more. Probably almost a year.

EE: So more than half the time you spent at the elevators was with him?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Well, that's good. Do you have memories of any of the specific elevators? Better, worse, more difficult, easy?

PS: Yeah. The elevators in Westfort were very rough, scrubbing--.

[Telephone rings]

[Audio pauses]

EE: [Laughs] Well, you're a young man.

OM: Yeah. Thanks, Ernie. All righty.

PS: Okay.

EE: So you were saying about the Westfort elevators, the ones along the Kaministiquia River, I guess.

PS: Yeah. Reliance Elevator was one I found very, very poorly made. Old everything and not safe. There was them, there was two elevators right by Great Lakes Papermill right in the turning basin. Small capacity ones.

EE: Do you remember the names of those two elevators?

PS: One was Northwestern. The other one, I thought it was Thunder Bay Terminals or something, but I'm not sure.

EE: So they were still there in '48, let's say?

PS: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

EE: Because other people I've mentioned them too, and they don't remember that. But there's a picture at the archives, the city archives, that shows those elevators, so I actually drove down one day to satisfy myself that the stuff was there. And of course, the concrete foundations are still there for those elevators.

PS: That's right. Then Paterson's Elevator was by the swing bridge. It was a good elevator to a point, but you know, concrete in an elevator, there's concrete and there's concrete. Theirs was not that good, meaning we would—with these drill punches—were putting bolts into the holes in the wall to put bolts anchored because there were brackets. Because there's pipes outside the building going up. Well, it was work. You'd make this hole, you've got to bang on the hard concrete a lot, but at theirs, you take it and half the amount of belting, and the hole would go through. You know? So we liked that. [Laughing]

EE: Holes more than an inch in diameter basically with a punch. You were driving a steel punch.

PS: Yeah. Yeah. A star drill we called them.

EE: A star drill.

PS: And it was all manual, so *bang-bang* and turn it and *bang-bang*. You know? So they had that.

EE: They had silly-putty rather than concrete, eh?

PS: Yeah! But otherwise, it wasn't a bad elevator. They kept it. And they had a lot of dust control already in, so it was working. So it wasn't so dirty to work there.

EE: That's interesting. So the Paterson's--. I'm not sure when it was built. I know it was taken down in 1978 the year I came to town. I came by to see it being knocked down. But whenever it was built, it was obviously done by a poorer contractor than the other elevators.

PS: Yeah. That's the one we noticed was the--.

EE: Sure. Well, that's one way of measuring! [Laughing]

PS: The other ones, Grand Trunk we worked in and Searle Elevator beside it. Grand Trunk was very poorly made, the elevator, and it had--. Like most elevators, you have the top of the bin is concrete floor, and you've got a hatch there.

EE: The top is flat, is it, way up at the top there?

PS: Yeah. You've got your house--.

EE: Your workhouse over that.

PS: Well, the cap, you know, the canopy type. Because you walk all the bins from one end to the other and the belting there and that. The only one that had exposed elevators and you walked on catwalks was Grand Trunk where Cargill is now. So the bins were open, and some of them when they're empty, you look 100 feet down. It's dark. It's sort of creepy. Spooky, you know?

[0:30:17]

EE: Were there barriers on the catwalks at the top?

PS: Yeah, yeah. You had the catwalks and--.

EE: Like sturdy things you could lean against?

PS: It was iron. The only thing, when they started to work and fill up or take grain up, you almost figured you were going to blow the ceiling off above you because of the openness. You're pushing, say, grain down to the bin down there and it's, say, almost empty, so the grain is going down 100 feet from the top belt. *Kaboom*, you know? The other thing there was an experience that frightened us. It was spring. The tugs were bringing in a boat, and Cargill, you come in by the Abitibi Mill there, and you've kind of got to turn there and go past Searle here and tuck into here. Well, the tugs were with this ship trying to get it docked, and they hit the dock. And we were all working up there, and suddenly, you know, a jolt—like a serious one.

EE: You could feel it at the top of the silos?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Wow.

PS: The ice jamming, you know, it was spring. And what happens to you when that happens is your legs freeze like cramps almost. I was holding something for this fellow, and all of a sudden, I froze in the legs here from that. That was for us all frightening that experience because that was a real like an earthquake type of thing. Because it was an old junky elevator, too. Everything was old. It was a lot of corrugated iron on the workhouse, you know, tin shack like.

EE: Yeah, yeah. [Laughs]

PS: I noticed when I've gone with my boat in the past years, Cargill did put a lot of money in it and did fix a lot of it compared to what I remember it. Searle next-door was kind of a fancy one with the brick and that. We had a guy, Irwin—the Irwin family of Fort William—one of them was the superintendent of the elevator. "Yours to use but not to abuse. Watch your step. Do not abuse this or that." He was a safety nut, and that was good. If something happened with the machinery or anything or an accident or almost an accident, you shut the elevator down. All trades, everybody's got to go to this big meeting hole. "All right. What happened? And what can we do about it?" The whole nine yards. "We don't want anybody killed here." He was that kind of guy. And once three weeks or a month, you'd have that call that everybody has to drop their tools and be down there to the meeting because he was there wanting to get to the bottom of this, you know? So he was sort of like a sergeant, but that was okay. People thought he'd overdone it. Well, maybe so, but his elevator, nobody got killed. And at some of these other elevators you do have a half-mast flag that somebody was killed there, you know?

EE: Sure. Is there any other manager you remember from this work? Because we have heard of Mr. Irwin before with appreciation, so you're confirming something we were told just a week ago by V. B. Cook.

PS: Well, the others kind of they were nameless and you never--. The tradesmen that, you never knew the guy's name, and he was never around to check. He had his lieutenants come around and do the groundwork for him that way. So you didn't know their name even.

EE: Did you work at other elevators? Because I'm getting this picture from Paterson and the grain--.

PS: Well, the Grand Trunk, worked there for a month or two.

EE: Sure.

PS: And then Searle, a week or two next-door.

EE: Yes.

PS: And Pool 7.

EE: So you were at the Intercity area then.

PS: Yeah, Pool 7. Couple of months. Richardson was the one I worked with the longest. Well, I went first there. Almost half a winter there.

[0:35:09]

EE: You started at Richardson's?

PS: Yeah. From the shop to Richardson.

EE: The one in the north end of the waterfront.

PS: Yeah. And it was a pretty good elevator in construction, and it was taken care of pretty good. There was always maintenance men working the ground. And Irwin was somewhat that way. He had a kind of Westfort camaraderie with labour people that, "We'll fit you in some way if you can't do the hard stuff. We'll find a spot for you."

[Telephone rings]

[Audio pauses]

EE: Yeah. Did you know anything more about Mr. Irwin at the Searle Elevator?

PS: No. Well, one funny incident happened. Elevators guys, some of them, they sometimes have nothing to do so they're bugging around. Sometimes what happened was there's a floor over there, this is open—say 20 feet or so—but there's a half floor over here and a railing there. So this guy, the elevators guys, were sometimes bored, and they kind of bugger up your job. You're up there and he's yanking at your foot or something, you know? So this time, this guy, as you walk--. You're standing on the floor and the railing, and the next layer's down there open right up. So he goes and starts to pee, and old man Irwin or somebody else comes, and they turn around--. [Laughing]

EE: Caught it full in the face, did he?

PS: Yeah, and that guy--. And he took off to the corner to sweep his floors and everything, but we told him that we were going to tell them because he used to bugger, hide our tools and stuff like that, and now we had him because old Irwin was--. "He did it! He did it! We saw it!" You know? [Laughing] That's what it was. We were going to tell him. Well, from then on, he never, never hid our tools or bugged around with us. In fact, we'd say, "Go down and buy some pop for us." He did it. [Laughing] But old Irwin, I'm sure there would have been a firing squad. [Laughing]

EE: Well, there's occasions at which blackmail can be very useful. [Laughs]

PS: Yeah. Yeah, that was--. Oh, God. And there was about three or four of us that saw it all. Jesus! [Laughs]

EE: Enough witnesses for sure.

PS: So.

EE: Well, you were saying you'd worked at the Richardson's as well, and you were saying something about the grounds and--.

PS: Yeah. They had lawn things done and everything. The downside for them was, that I remember then, the dredge would come and try to scrape the waterline. 27 feet you've got to be.

EE: For the ships coming in?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Right.

PS: Because the ships when they loaded, they're usually 26 feet. And then again, you know, the grain trimmers have to make sure--

EE: Yeah. That the load's evenly distributed.

PS: That she's level because either the back is going to drag on the ground or the front. The elevator was on rock because you'd watch the bucket come out of the water, and it's a piece of shale and that's all. It was all plowing away. You're chipping away at rock sort of thing. But they cleaned it up best they--. The silt and everything, to keep that depth. And the piers and everything were pretty solid. They had sheet pilings underneath. That was good because a lot of the other old elevators just had the pilings and then this concrete dock. You know, if the water goes down a foot or so level in the lake, well then it exposes the wood, and the wood gets air, and they're rotting.

EE: Yeah. Dry rots it.

PS: And you've got this tonne of bloody concrete on top. It was not, you know, safe.

EE: Was that the reason why one of the elevators slid into the bay?

PS: Grain Growers, yeah. Yeah. Well, their part was the pilings, yeah. They weakened. So when she fell, of course, she fell at the shipyards, and they had that corrugated shop there. And the wave was so high that it blew the tin off it and everything, you know, from say, oh, a distance of about a block I guess from the Grain Growers to the shipyards. It did some damage there.

[0:40:35]

EE: This was actually near Port Arthur Shipyard, Shipbuilding, was it?

PS: Eh?

EE: When you say shipyards, you mean Port Ship?

PS: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: Because that's what I was remembering, and yet, Mr. Cook last week was suggesting another location altogether.

OM: I think you've been vindicated, Ernie.

EE: Okay. It was near Port Ship.

OM: He was also talking about Ogilvie's, which is much earlier.

EE: Yeah. Which of course, is way over--.

PS: On the Kam River.

EE: On the Kam River.

PS: At the mouth of McKeller coming in and that.

EE: Yes.

PS: Well, that elevator, if you look in the history of it, it did fall over. It flopped into the water and back I think in the '20s or maybe earlier. Because I saw a picture in the newspaper of history of the past, and part of it fell. But Grain Growers, that was a real--. And yet, you know, I got into a little bit of diving then, scuba diving. That was new around here. We had a gang and we tried to go around these elevators.

EE: Did you now? [Laughs]

PS: You know, just--.

EE: Sure, exploring.

PS: Yeah. The guide had a bit of a, well, he knew more about it, and he had some underground hardhat diver outfit and everything. The sheet piling was on the dock where the elevator went over. Well, then that sheet piling bent as the elevator fell in. Well, now they had to bust all that concrete and get that out, and the sheet piling is bent like that.

EE: Sure.

PS: So they'd go down with torches and cut off at the bottom there and pull up that iron, you know. That was Grain Growers.

EE: And you observed some of this out scuba diving?

PS: A little bit, yeah, that. But they didn't want us around, too. Like in other words, you went there, looked around, and beat it because they didn't want you around because of accident and that.

EE: Yeah. Legal liability.

PS: An awful lot of the guys figured, "Well, if that's going to go, who's to say this section isn't going to go when I'm underneath it?" [Laughs]

EE: Yeah. Yeah, that is a sobering thought.

PS: Yeah.

EE: Nothing like standing at the top of a high-rise building and sort of imagining it falling over to make you feel a little uneasy in the tummy. So those were the various elevators in which you worked, then, in '47-'48, the ones that you've mentioned. You've described some differences amongst them. Are there other things you remember about these elevators?

PS: Well, the one we--. Empire was right at the mouth of the Kam, and it was a lot of rope pulleys, manual stuff, you know? Actually, Gordon Stenson's father, I had a talk with him one time when he was in the hospital, and he was the millwright chief there and pipe fitter. And everything was--. Well, some of those elevators had their own boiler place, you know, with the big stack

and the whole thing, and Empire had all that. But it was a piece of junk. The whole workhouse was not cement. It was all iron with tin--. What's the word for that? Tin, corrugated iron.

EE: Corrugated steel.

PS: you know? Screwed onto it.

EE: Or riveted to it or whatever.

PS: [Laughs]

EE: Now, he worked in it. He hadn't built it, this Mr. Stenson?

PS: he worked in it. He was in charge of the maintenance of it. And he was telling me about all the pipe fitting and stuff they had to do. The steam pipes and everything, that was a lot of work for a lot of them. Because some of the newer elevators were more involved with the electricity, but some of these had steam motors to generate electricity or to provide heat and power. So it was pretty crude stuff. The Empire was that way.

[0:45:00]

EE: It would be one of that first generation or whatever of elevators, I suppose.

PS: Yeah. Yeah.

EE: Were the others that you worked in pretty well the same in regard to the equipment? I suppose they were all electric, electric motors in--?

PS: Yeah, yeah.

EE: In the various elevators.

PS: Yeah. Well, Empire wasn't much. I could never understand where all these big ropes going, that thick, and pulleys up there, and pulleys down below. I didn't understand what that was really to do--.

EE: Well, it may have been—if they had a central steam engine somewhere or other—this was the drive, the power for the various pieces of equipment.

PS: Yeah, yeah. To run the belts.

EE: Running the belts and all the rest of it. Because 140 years ago, the buffalo were decimated on the Prairies and on the American plains because buffalo hide made great belting. And before electricity really came in, when it was steam engines being used, they were making the buffalo leather and bison hides into belts for the factories and so on. So in this case, of course, the bison were gone, so ropes had to serve the purpose of transmitting the power.

PS: Yeah. Do you guys want a beer at all?

EE: I think we should probably carry on.

PS: Okay.

EE: Is there anything more about the grain trade that you've been involved with, Peter, after doing this work and snorkelling around, scuba diving around elevators and so on? Did you do any--. Did Northland or Vulcan, did--.

PS: Well, yeah. **[Telephone rings]** Jesus!

[Audio pauses]

Well, Vulcan in the 1980s--. Oh, sorry. Okay? In the 1980s, Vulcan, we had a big hydraulic shop. We did a lot of hydraulic work in elevators—Pool 7, those—with hydraulic motors to pull the boxcars in and spot them so the guy can, with his typewriter at the workhouse office, click on and hook up and move the cars and move them back. Stuff like that.

EE: So this would be one of the features of automation in the elevators that was coming in.

PS: Automation. And that way it cut men on the tracks and everything. And it was, you know, better, but it was a big job for us. All the piping that had to be--. Just like electrical wiring, but now we had hydraulic oil under pressure going to wherever to move a cylinder or a hydraulic motor, you know?

EE: Were you involved in the installation of any of this, or just mainly at the shop working on them?

PS: Mainly at the shop, all on the shop. We had guys in the field there working set and putting it up, but we would make the stuff or the engineer we had would buy the motors and that, and the guys would go out and install this stuff.

EE: So you'd become a machinist by this time, I guess, had you?

PS: Well, I was kind of lead hand sort of called. I sort of was a foreman, and you'd make sure the work orders were done and everything and, "Here, go down to such-and-such elevator and put in the motor," or something, you know? That. So I stayed mostly in the shop over that end.

EE: You were mentioning the engineers. I guess we might go back to the '47-'48 work. You mentioned that C. D. Howe was involved with that. He was a minister, so it was his company that had the-- C. D. Howe Engineering, if you will, had the job of supervising, drawing up the plans, I suppose, and all the rest of it.

PS: Yeah. Yeah. They did a lot of that. Well, Arnie Simonson from our Lodge, he was working for them and into that kind of stuff in his younger days. Him and--.

EE: Is he still alive?

PS: Yeah. But he's in tough shape. He had that stroke years ago and--.

EE: Oh, yes. I see.

PS: What else I can tell you? Hm. The only thing, I sometime rowed my boat and noticed how many elevators used to be and how many there are left, you know?

EE: Yes.

[0:49:52]

PS: Kam River was the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] Elevator D by this CPR Station was the other elevator, CPR's. And they weren't concrete, they were steel bins. Across the river from there, you looked where that scrapyards is as you went over the Jackknife Bridge, there was an elevator there, but just a few bins were left. There was a big fire years ago. The workhouse and everything was wooden, and I guess it caught fire. And then around the corner towards Paterson's is the Reliance was one, the Reliance, and the other one was Western Grain, I think it was. Then came Paterson's and then came the two elevators at Great Lakes, because that turning basin was manmade that part there. Because the boats went up and turned themselves around. If the big ones had trouble, the tugs would pull them. That was all thanks to old man Paterson, Senator Paterson. He managed to have the Kam River dredged. That cost a fortune, I guess.

EE: I suppose it did. And the turning basin or whatever near the Cargill elevator as well.

PS: Yeah.

EE: It was cut out, wasn't it? Because when you fly in, if you fly in right over that area, you can see how squared out the riverbank is there. So it's clearly been cut out and dredged out in order to allow for--.

PS: Yeah. And you know, when you're thinking about this, you see the dock and 27 feet down below is the bottom. Yeah. And it's standing on stilts with these pilings!

EE: Yes.

PS: you know? Then the other things was one, Pool 4A and Pool 4B—the one that blew up next to Richardson—next was another elevator called, it was Pool 9, but I don't know Sask Pool or Manitoba Pool. When I came first to Richardson, they said--. Barnett-McQueen guys came to lunch at Richardson's, and they had been working on that Pool 9. And they were mad and bitching and, "What the hell's the matter?" Well, they were down at the elevator bottom, and they're drilling holes into the ground and into the pilings buried and putting cross braces all over.

EE: Just to hold everything up.

PS: About a two inch or an inch and a half or two of rods.

EE: Steel rods.

PS: With threads to bolt it, X-bracing, because the elevator was sinking in the front, the whole thing. So I thought, “They can’t be thinking.” You know, didn’t know much nothing from nothing. He said, “Kid, go up in that workhouse there and take a look for yourself.” So I went up our elevator, the workhouse just above the bins, and looked at their bins. And sure enough, your eyesight it was, I imagine, about two feet--.

EE: Lower at one end?

PS: Lower, and you know, up to the workhouse standing where it should be. [Laughs] The funny thing was, and I told the other guy, “It’s true them guys was saying.” They closed that.

EE: It would have been better to take it down by the sound of it or burn it in the wintertime or whatever. I mean--.

PS: Well, this one, it was all cement though.

EE: Oh, it was cement. I see.

PS: Yeah. It wasn’t--. Yeah. But the trouble was the foundation. Yeah.

EE: Yeah. The pilings.

PS: That’s why next door was Grain Growers, and that’s when it toppled over was because of the--. You know?

EE: Yes. Yes.

PS: I think Grain Growers didn’t have the sheet piling early enough, and when a ship is going out, a lot of the places they wanted, well, the tug will take them out and get them to stay in the channel. But the captain don’t want to use the tugs because it’s x-amount of dollars an hour, and that’s his bonuses just going out there. So he wants to take his ship out by himself.

EE: So he starts backing it out with the propellers reversed, eh?

PS: The prop is going, and what that’s doing is washing the soil and everything from underneath the dock, you know? [Laughs] So, like, some of those elevators didn’t have the sheet piling or it came later. So, you know.

EE: The elevator companies discovered it would be a good idea to have sheet piling in place. [Laughs]

PS: Well, Grain Growers found because that's how they bent there because--. But they should have done it years earlier.

[0:55:02]

EE: Yeah. Driven it right down well into the dirt. Well, I guess, I might ask whether there was anything you'd like to add to what you've been saying in terms of what people might be interested in knowing? You've told us a lot of interesting things about the elevators, some of it from--. It helps to be outside sometimes just staring at the things.

PS: Yeah. That was, you know, the year and a half, two, that I was there, it was kind of a blip in my working career.

EE: You mentioned Barnett and McQueen, the fellows working on this elevator trying to brace it. Did you run into people from that company very often? Or from C. D. Howe for that matter?

PS: Well, Barnett-McQueen was kind of something like super millwrights. They had sheet metal guys. They had iron workers and that and fixed docks. Stuff like that a little bit. Something like Thunder Bay Harbour was.

EE: Sure.

PS: And in those days, equipment was small. Equipment was--. Well, they were small companies really. Machinery wasn't made when I came to Vulcan, and then later on we had the big backhoes. We had all the big machinery. Everything was just you didn't have a bloody bicycle anymore, you had a bloody high-powered race car.

EE: Yeah. Do something with that kind of thing.

PS: And these companies as they got up on their feet, they were starting to buy the cranes and everything. Well, the first cranes we sold was a cable—high receivers they were called—cable, and the guy, manual levers, pulling all winches in here to push the bucket or pull the bucket and lift the boom and drop it into the river or water and scoop up the soil and lift it out.

EE: All kind of mechanical rather than hydraulic?

PS: Yeah, that's right.

EE: And later on, it becomes much more sophisticated once the hydraulics are put in.

PS: Yeah. So.

EE: C. D. Howe, I guess, was a power—not just the man in politics, but his company as well—in the local business. I suppose they got a lot of the business over all these years.

PS: He had a lot to--. How do you say? He had the power. The only thing, I tried to find somebody--. There was a draftsman that worked for him, and I said, “Could you go to them and ask them for God’s sake get some money--.”

[Telephone rings]

[Audio pauses]

EE: You were just saying about the draft--. Sorry.

PS: The what?

EE: You were saying something about someone at C. D. Howe, the draftsman.

PS: Yeah. Well, I felt the shipyards needed a longer drydock. And you know, I was a young guy, but I could see the ships were getting larger in the lakes. And when we were kids, we always went to the docks from Ogden School in the springtime and summer, and we were interested in boats. Some of the guys in the East End around the corner from the Welcome Islands, there’s a ship coming in, and the ship is coming in, oh, every couple hours. The guy said, “Oh, that’s the *A. A. Hudson*.” It was a package freighter, an older one, you know? Green, I remember. I says, “How do you know?” He says, “What do you mean?” He says, “I know that ship.” So I waited, oh, it was a half an hour before it made it from the Welcomes into the Kam River and to the freight sheds. It was a package freighter. It was the *A. A. Hudson*. That’s how it got--. So then I started to watch and try to learn which ships are going and the name of them to spot them from a distance, you know? So that was a game us guys had there.

EE: Sure. And so you got a sense of the fact that the ships were growing?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Would it be particularly after the Seaway that--?

PS: Before the Seaway.

EE: Even before. Because C. D. Howe, of course, was defeated in 1957, but--.

PS: Way before that, yeah. Because this was, well, during the war.

EE: Mmhhh. That you were observing this?

PS: Yeah.

EE: Yeah.

PS: And then the *James Whalen* you see tied up there, she was a hero. She was the beast breaking ice in the Kam River. What we would do is the guys that lived there, we'd give a note to each other, and they'd give me a note, "The *James Whalen*'s starting to break at the mouth of the Kam by Empire Elevator." So that meant we looked at each other that we'd take the afternoon off of school to sit at the freight sheds to watch the *Whalen* breaking ice. [Laughing] And the teacher found out about it. I says, "Miss Monroe, you have to understand. It's hard on us fellas when the tug is out there breaking ice. It's happiness!" [Laughing] I couldn't think of what else to say!

[1:00:40]

EE: Is that what you said to the teacher? [Laughing] Did he smile?

PS: It was a woman.

EE: Oh, a woman.

PS: Yeah. And later on, I met her at a funeral, you know, at Westley, and it was one of the teachers, of her peers at the time. She was 95. Her name was Hazelton. I says, "You remember us guys, those days?" She says, "Yeah, I remember you guys. And I didn't believe you either!" [Laughing] But to remember all that, you know, and named all of us and asked where so-and-so and so-and-so

is from all that time. I always figured that the student that gave the most trouble to the teacher, you never forgot their name. [Laughing] Or, you know, was a bugger like us, and they remember your name! [Laughing]

EE: Well, that's probably true. [Laughing] The memorable ones.

PS: Yeah.

EE: For good reasons or not so good! [Laughs]

PS: It was kind of for a boy to grow up there, it was very good. We all learned how to skate as young guys, and we were good skaters. That's why some of our hockey players that came were good because they were there all the time. Then the McIntyre River, we swam. Go down where the Seaway terminal is, all that they had for--. When I first came--1939 there--they had the sand suckers in the harbour and sucked the sand and pump out big pipes to where the Seaway terminal sits now and all that. And then that flowed. Sand would settle. And the Neebing and the McIntyre River, the water would flow out and out. They did that for--. They had these big dredges with big iron augers.

EE: This was sort of they were dredging these rivers?

PS: Yeah, to get the harbour dredged out. You played on it. It was like a desert some years, that soil. And if you wanted to hit a golf ball, you could find it, you know? Everything. It was like a Sahara Desert.

EE: No greens there. [Laughs]

PS: Yeah. No kid had a chance like that to swim in the river down there and skate in the winter. A lot of kids--. I came from Finlayson Street previous to that. You didn't do that, you know, because there was just no opportunity. So for us, building a shack in the bush there and a clubhouse, well, you learned a little carpentry and that. So that part in my life to this day when we talk about those old memories, they were good memories.

EE: Happy memories. You mentioned the CPR Elevators along the Kam.

PS: Yeah.

EE: How long did they last? They were still there in the '40s?

PS: Yeah. They started to--. Elevator D came on the curve of the Kam towards Paterson's because the International Harvester was this side of it. If you go up the Jackknife--.

EE: The big warehouse there.

PS: It was--. Yeah. And that was big time, because all the farming equipment was brought in by package freighter, unloaded at that place, and then from there it was on rail to Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

EE: Sure.

PS: Especially during the war years and that.

EE: Did Massey-Harris and maybe John Deere do the same thing, or was it primarily International Harvester?

PS: It was International. John Deere and those others were small. They brought stuff from the east by rail.

EE: Oh, rail all the way.

PS: And it was, you know, we had a shop, they'd have the equivalent of a service station. You know, small. John Deere was very small. They were right where Mario's Bowling Alley is on--.

EE: Right. Yeah. When you mention that Mr. Andrews was the person who owned the--? No, no. That was the other business. John Andrews owned the other business.

PS: Northland Machinery.

EE: Yeah. Which became--?

PS: It's still--. I think it folded.

EE: It is still there, right. The predecessor to Vulcan was what I was thinking of. Twin City?

PS: Oh, okay. Twin City was started--. Now, it's got an interesting history. They had a bunch of Airforce guys and a few army guys. They put in some money in it, and they were running it like the army, and finally we had the owner--. The other guys got forced out and ended up two owners. There was one guy, Art McGowan and Colonel Johnson. Now Colonel Johnson was the brother of Eddy Johnson that owned the Pigeon Timber Company, which was then a big company.

[1:05:46]

EE: It was indeed.

PS: Sawmill and the whole nine yards. Well, this colonel--. You know, I used go down to the counter at lunchtime and look at the magazines, and some of it is from West Point cadets when he was--. I'd look at them, you know, and this guy, he was manager at Marathon Papers. And of course, he was officer, an American officer, but now he was in the Canadian army, and he wanted to be released from his responsibility in Marathon, but Marathon was American owned then, I think.

EE: [American Ken], was it?

PS: And he went over during the war, and he was personal aid to Lord Mountbatten. The colonel is an aid to the general type of thing.

EE: Sure, yes.

PS: So when I saw this picture--. Remember at the Yalta thing that all the ships were down at Canada, there was Roosevelt and Stalin and even--.

OM: Churchill.

PS: Churchill.

EE: Yeah, the group portrait of them.

PS: De Gaulle, I think, was and that. Well, if you've seen the pictures of Lord Mountbatten, well, Colonel Johnson, the aide, and all the generals that were there were aides. He was one of them there standing, you know? So he was like a man's man for us guys. He run it like an army, but he still was a type of guy--. We invented a lot of stuff to improve the International equipment. The guys, the

fabricators of the diesel or the iron, the welding, innovated, made it, re-done it—some of it—so it would stand better. And he was really proud of us for that, you know. That was--. And the International Harvester guys, they'd come to us here, this dealership, to learn and take pictures of everything. Then a year or two later on the production line that improvement would come on, you know?

EE: Were you selling much equipment here at the Lakehead, or was it--? Because International Harvester is I think of farm machinery for the Prairies.

PS: Well, yeah. We were the construction equipment. The farm dealership was Coslett's on Syndicate Avenue.

EE: Oh, okay.

PS: And then they took Coslett's into our shop, so we had the farm machinery in the back and--.

EE: But yours was--.

[Telephone rings]

PS: And the stuff in the Kam River, the outfit, that was a separate Hamilton--. Our stuff came from Chicago, theirs came from Hamilton, and it went west.

EE: Yes. I can understand that.

PS: So at that time, there was a lot of activity on the water and a lot of activity on the rail.

EE: Yeah. Oh, I can well imagine. Well, is there anything else? Some of these things in terms of changes on the job and in the grain trade, well, you don't have very much in the way of experience of that.

PS: No, no.

EE: Challenges, I think you've told us about some of the challenges you faced on the job.

PS: Yeah.

EE: And some vivid memories as well. Are there any questions about your work in connection with grain movement through the city that I might have asked that come to mind?

PS: No. Yeah, no. I had nothing to do--. Like Simpson Street, a couple of guys had small feed stores, you know. Bought bags for chicken feeding and that. I was never involved in that. That was just another store for us.

EE: Yeah, as far as you were concerned. Any question come to mind for you, Owen? Right. Well, you've given us some interesting insight, particularly into the '47-'48.

PS: Yeah.

EE: You've walked us around and swum us around elevators. I think that's useful and interesting.

PS: Yeah.

EE: Thanks very much, Peter, for giving us some time this Friday afternoon.

[1:10:00]

PS: Okay. Well, that kind of brought up old memories that even I had to go back and--.

EE: A walk down memory lane is kind of fun!

PS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

End of interview.