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Company Affiliations: Manitoba Pool Elevators, Canadian Wheat Board (CWB)

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Summary: Retired general director of country services for the Canadian Wheat Board Fred Van Alstyne discusses his career in the grain business. He describes his first job as office boy for Manitoba Pool Elevators in their Winnipeg head office, going through a comprehensive training program, and being sent out to the country elevators as a labourer. He recounts his move to the CWB in their permits department, dealing with farmers' permit book issues and introducing an advanced payment system for farm improvements. As he became general manager of the country services, he describes a typical day on the job and the major changes in his work, like computerization, decreases in cooperation, and downsizing of permanent staff. Van Alstyne discusses his fears concerning the eradication of the CWB and predicts the future of the organization. Other topics discussed include the social aspect of the grain industry, his brief time as an expert witness in advance payment suits, Canada's resilience through change, the CWB's connection to railways and farmers, and his memories of staffing the Montreal Expo and speaking at the Canadian International Grains Institute.

Keywords: Manitoba Pool Elevators (MPE); Canadian Wheat Board (CWB); Farmer cooperatives; Country grain elevators; Elevator managers; Agricultural economics; Grain accounting; Agricultural policy; Computerization; Grain trade—Laws and legislation; Prairie Grains Advance Payments Act; Canadian Grain Commission (CGC); CWN permit books; Grain farmers/producers; Grain transportation—rail; Downsizing; Canadian International Grains Institute (CIGI); Grain marketing; International trade

Time, Speaker, Narrative
BC: Okay. Why isn't it recording? Just a minute here folks. It is recording. MM: Good. I'm Mary Mitchell, and I'm here with Bea Cherniack, and it's May 17, 2011. I'll just ask you to give us your full name and where you were born and when you were born. FV: Okay. My name is Fred Van Alstyne. I was born right here in Winnipeg on May the 26th, 1932, I believe.

MM: Okay. Thank you. Maybe you could start by telling us when did your career start and how long did it last?

FV: I sure could. My career started in 1950 because I was going to school at that time, and the school was on the banks of the Assiniboine River, and it was flooded in the spring. They closed the school. I was never much of a student, so my parents said, "Well, you're not going to sit around all summer. You better find a job." I had one sister that worked for National Grain and another sister that worked for Pioneer Grain. They were both in the grain business, and they were both comptometer operators. So between them, they got me a job as office boy at Manitoba Pool.

I started in, I guess, early April at Manitoba Pool, and the Manitoba Pool had just moved into I think they call it the old Prairie Grain Bank on the corner of Lombard and Main. It's not there any longer, but it was a beautiful, beautiful building, and the Pools had bought it, and Manitoba Pool had the first four or five floors. Sask Pool had a couple of floors, Alberta Pool had an office in there, and up on the roof they had a cafeteria. My first job as office boy was to clean up the flooded basement in the Pool building and paint it, which we did. It took us about two weeks to do. The paint was hardly dry when they said, "Well, now we've got another job for you. How would you like to help the people from the construction department? The roof is leaking, and they're going to patch the roof."

So I went from the bottom of the grain industry to the very top of the grain industry in one month. [Laughing] So it was quite an experience. But that's what got me into Manitoba Pool, and once I got there--. In those days, there was no cell phones or messages or voice mail, and everything was an office kid would run around with a note, and you had to start there and then take the answer back. While you were standing there, you were learning what they were doing and why they were doing it. You got to know everybody in the place. I just met some wonderful, wonderful men in there, and they seemed to take to me too. They were like mentors and fathers to me. I sure appreciated it.

Then when the time came to go back to school in September, I said, "You know, I'm not going to repeat my year." I didn't enjoy school that much. So my mother and dad said, "Well, if you don't go back to school, you better do well in the grain business, and you better apply yourself to it and learn it." So I did. I went back to Manitoba Pool, and I went to some of the men that I had talked to, and I said, "You know, I'm not going to go back to school, so I'd like to get on permanently."

MM: And how old were you then?

FV: I would be 18, I guess, I would be. Yeah, I'd be 18.

[0:05:05]

MM: Okay.

FV: So they said, "Well, you know, if you're going to make a career out of it, you're going to have to learn from the bottom up. You don't have much experience. You don't know anything about a farm." I said, "No, that's true." So they put together different men. Can I mention their names? Should I?

BC: Oh, of course. Everything.

MM: Please do.

FV: Should I mention their names? Because you might know some of them. There's Mr. Richmond was the secretary of the Pool at that time, I think, and Ed Russenholt was the public relations man sort of thing. Bill Parker was a tremendous guy and really nice, and Harold Donovan. These fellows just treated you like a son. I really just fell in love with the grain business. So they put together this package for me that I started to move around. They said it would be a junior executive training program, and they would move me from department to department, and on lunch hours and on Saturdays, I worked with the grain inspection department learning the grain, learning the different varieties and different grades and moisture and what have you.

Then from there, after two and a half years, they said, "Well, now it's time to go out into the country." They put me out into the big elevator in Letellier, Manitoba, and I was lucky enough to learn under one of the best elevator managers there is. Bonnie Johnson was his name.

MM: What was his name again?

FV: Bonnie Johnson.

MM: Okay. Thank you.

FV: He was the elevator manager, and he had an assistant, and I was the low man on the totem pole, but that was great because we were loading lots and lots of cars. I learned the workings of an elevator from the boot to the cupola, and how to clean them all, and how to sweep out grain cars and build grain doors and shovel grain. [Laughs] It was a real experience. Then when I went up a notch, and they put me in as a second man down the line at St. Jean. I went to St. Jean and worked there under Tony Bouchard, who

was another fellow that was a big help to me in teaching me. He taught me a lot. He taught me how to swear in French too, which came in handy. [Laughing] So that was the story of Manitoba Pool. The closing part of it was—the reason I left Manitoba Pool—was the girl that taught me how to work a comptometer in the office--.

MM: Can you tell me more about what a comptometer is? Was.

FV: The girl that taught me?

MM: Tell me more about this machine.

FV: The comptometer? Oh. The comptometer--.

BC: He's more interested in the girl! [Laughing]

FV: Yeah! The comptometer was like a big adding machine, and it had two sections for pounds and bushels. You did all your calculations on there, and it was a big calculator, really.

MM: Okay, thank you.

FV: That was where all the accounting was done on. The adding machines that were, I guess, maybe came after that. I don't know.

MM: Okay. Anyway, there was a girl who operated it? [Laughs]

FV: Yeah. This girl that taught me how to work a comptometer, after I come back from the country, I went to a couple of social functions with the head office of Manitoba Pool, and her and I hit it off pretty good. I ended up marrying her. So some of these men that set me up also got a hold of me at that time and said, "You know, you're not going to qualify for a house for a long time. You've got still a lot to learn. You know everything there is to know, but you just need the experience."

[0:11:00]

So one of them said, "You know, why don't you think about changing your career, moving out from Manitoba Pool?" because Manitoba Pool was never really a very well-paying position. [Laughs] They were great people, they were all real, true cooperatives, and they didn't think anybody should make more money than the next guy. So they set me up with an interview at the Canadian

Wheat Board [CWB]. I went over and was interviewed at the Canadian Wheat Board, and I took my resume, and they accepted me, and I started work in July of 1955, I think it was, at the Canadian Wheat Board in the permit department.

That was when I--. The permit department at that time was in the Midtown Building on the corner of Graham and Edmonton. There was the permit department and the payment department and some of the old data processing equipment was on the second floor there. So I worked at there for two years in the permit department. When I first went to the permit department, they had just started to introduce a delivery system controlled by permits, and they would issue permits to individual producers, which outlined the number of acres under which they could deliver their grain on and that. These permits were a new experience. It was like an awful lot of new experiences—they got just tied up with red tape.

When I first went there, I couldn't believe I had walked into such a mess. They had producers' permit books piled up almost to the ceiling like cordwood. All these permit books had been sent in—according to the rules and regulations—sent in to get changes made on them because there was something wrong with them. To change a permit book, they would have to get documentation—like a lease or an affidavit or a bill of sale—and of course, some of these leases and bills of sales were written on the back of cigarette boxes and stuff. It was just a horrible nightmare. And then the girls would have to--. We had a staff of, gosh, there must have been a staff there of 100 to 125 girls that just would copy these permit books and all the details from the old book into a new book, and then they would give them to a fellow who would dictate a letter, and then a typist would type the letter. It just took forever.

[0:15:01]

MM: What was your job there?

FV: I was supposed to be writing these letters, helping write the letters. There was three of us, and there was just no way you could--. You found yourself dictating the same letters over and over and over. So I guess I was probably the youngest guy and just the newest out of school out of all the fellows. So I said to them, "Jeez, there's got to be a different way to do this." So we put our heads together, and we come up with form letters, and instead of copying a whole permit book, what we had the printers do was just make us stickers of pages and stuff, and we would just put them on the old book and not have to re-copy the whole book. Then we used form letters to send them back. We found that we were only changing two or three instances within the letter, so we just left them blank, and we filled them in by hand. I'm sure that there wasn't any of the producers cared if they had a hand-written note.

But we finally got over that and things settled down, but then the government of the day—I think it was the great Diefenbaker—he come up. At that time, the crops were very good. This was 1957-58. The crops were very, very good. Sales were not very good. I think there was a bit of a Cold War going on at that time, so we had a storage problem in the Prairie provinces. Farmers were going to be called upon to store their grain, and they had no money to build storage. So they come up and hatched an idea of advances. The first year we had advances was in, I guess, 1956, and the advances were all done through the banks. The farmers didn't particularly care to work with the banks, and they didn't care for the banks to be--. They didn't like to be indebted to the banks.

So the idea came up that, well, the Wheat Board could manage this project, and it was only short term to get over the storage problems for a couple of years. So the great, great guy, the lawyer for the Canadian Wheat Board, Henry B. Monk, and the chief executive officer controller, Gordon Earl, they put their heads together and come up with a system where the Wheat Board borrowed the money. They handled the advances, and we set up a department to issue advance payments to producers based on the grain that they had in storage on their farm that they were going to repay us when the time came for them to deliver that grain. They pledged that grain against their advance payments.

It was a huge success. We advanced millions and millions of dollars, and it really, really took off. So what was just a temporary two-year project, I did it until my dying days at the Wheat Board. The advanced payments became very, very important. Then I moved back to the main building at that time to head up this advanced payment department.

MM: What year was that then?

FV: That was in 1958, I believe it was, or '57, '58.

MM: Okay. Mmhmm.

[0:20:06]

FV: It wasn't long after that that the leases were up at the Midtown Building, and they organized a bit of a committee and decided to add onto the Wheat Board building. We eventually all ended up under one roof. When that happened, we amalgamated the payment department and the permit department and the advanced payment department into one department called the Country Services Division. That was where I got to be head of that division.

I guess from there we became more computerized. I got two or three people that were working under me, and they were very, very good with computer programming and that. We started to computerize most of the advance payment work, most of the payment

work, and we would be able to make a final payment or an adjustment payment in a matter of just a few days with these new computers and that. It was just fantastic.

From there, I guess the challenge was to try to computerize the permit book, and that's what we were working on when the idea at the Wheat Board--. I don't know what you would call it. The emphasis of the Wheat Board took a turn. I guess it was about 1977-78. Otto Lang was the Minister Responsible for the Wheat Board. He appointed Gerry Vogel as the chief commissioner, and the whole atmosphere changed. [Laughs] It was no longer a fun place to go to work. Before when we worked there in the '50s and the '60s, it was like one big family, and everybody helped everybody else. I mean not just within the Wheat Board, but within the grain industry. Whether you worked for Parrish & Heimbecker [P&H] or Pioneer Grain or whoever, one of the Pools, then we hired one another's kids. Everybody worked together. We had picnics and social events together and stuff.

But from when the government became involved with Otto Lang taking over and appointing board members that were not grain people--. The years that the Wheat Board just went ahead like gangbusters was the years of George McIver and Bill McNamara, and they were old grain men. They weren't scholars. They weren't doctors and stuff, but they were old grain men, and they were gentlemen. Millions and millions and dollars of transactions used to be done just with a handshake. It wasn't long before the government got involved and things changed. The handshakes turned into 15 copies of a certain document signed by everybody around the table. It just wasn't the same anymore.

[0:25:36]

That showed, I guess--. To me it was an indication that went right through the entire grain industry. Manitoba Pool gave up the ghost. They sold their elevators. UGG [United Grain Growers] sold their elevators. The Grain Exchange started to close down. It got smaller and smaller. Eventually, they moved over to the towers there across on the southwest corner of Portage and Main. The Grain Exchange Building started to fall apart. [Laughs] The grain business started to fall apart. When I left in 1989, I tell you I was glad to leave. I no longer looked forward to going to work. I just felt sorry for some of the people that I had left behind. It wasn't the same.

MM: Now, in the 1977-78 era, what was your job at that point when some of this change started to take place?

FV: I guess at that point I would have been the general director of country services division.

MM: Okay. Okay.

FV: Yeah.

MM: So you retired in 1989, then?

FV: Yes.

MM: Could you, during perhaps that era when you were general director, how would you describe a typical day on your job?

FV: Well, I guess first thing in the morning I usually got together with the heads of the other sections, and we laid out--. First of all, we would deal with the fires that developed overnight, and once they got put out, then we would start to plan for the day, and then we would finish up with maybe some long-term plans. Then we would break up at the division level. And the board would be meeting about 10:00 every morning, the commissioners—those commissioners that were there—and if it had anything to do with country services, I would usually attend the board meeting. That would take me through to almost lunch.

Then in the afternoon, I would spend an hour or so dictating either memos or letters or--. Well, one of the projects that we undertook--. I don't know what government it was, but it was during the Cold War, and they had a bunker out at, I believe it was out at Camp Shilo. We would spend hours and hours and hours documenting everything we did and copying forms. We would put these all together with a statement as to how to use them and why they were being used, and to this day, I guess they're still buried somewhere in Camp Shilo, I guess. But if you want to know how the Wheat Board ran, you dig up that bunker. [Laughs] It's all there.

[0:30:15]

BC: Never heard about this before. You're the first one to talk about this.

FV: Is that right?

MM: Fascinating! That's interesting. Now, so you told a little bit about who you interacted with inside the Wheat Board. What about external people that you related to?

FV: Well, as I say, when I was interested in the social aspect of the grain business, the people outside always seemed to—whether it be Bill Parrish at Parrish & Heimbecker or Bill Mulcahy at Mulcahy Grain—they would always find an excuse to have a cocktail party or a wine and cheese party. Paterson Grain through Winnipeg Charters always had a big party on Grey Cup day, and Grey

Cup day always fell on the same day that they--. Oh, what do they call it? Gee, you people might know the term. Split the knot? It's a navigation term.

BC: No idea. [Laughs]

FV: It had to do with the boats. That's when they tied up the boats, and they always made it on Grey Cup day. Patersons would put on a real big party on Grey Cup day, and they would close up the navigation at the Lakehead.

MM: Oh, okay.

FV: But as I say, then when we got into data processing and that, IBM were great people for putting on parties and that. There was a social aspect of it. Bill Parrish must be 90 years old now at least, I would think, and my daughter-in-law just started to work for Parrish & Heimbecker, and she's in with the executive circle. She's an assistant administrator to the management team. So one day, Bill Parrish was in and recognized the name and said, "Gee, are you any relation to Fred Van Alstyne?" [Laughs] She said, "That's my father-in-law." So it was a small world that we all lived in, but it was a great, great time in the grain business in those days.

MM: Now, you mentioned that sort of starting in the '78-'79 period the change started. What were the factors that were happening in the grain industry that prompted or sort of started Manitoba Pool and UGG selling off their elevators and--?

FV: I think it was pressure within the industry. The government were under pressure with the international trade agreements. The Wheat Board was always--. The Americans always felt the Wheat Board had a dirty edge over them, and they did. [Laughs] We did have a big advantage over them because we didn't fight amongst ourselves, and the Americans all fought amongst themselves and were their own worst enemies. This is what makes me so anxious today to speak out against these young fellows that think they can do better without an organized marketing system and an organized delivery system. It's not just the things you read about. It's the things they don't mention and the things they don't know about.

They would never have advanced payments if it wasn't for the Wheat Board. They would never have regulations for organic grain or non-registered grain. Now they have all that protection built in because the Wheat Board is looking after that interest. If they lose the Wheat Board, and it goes to Cargill and the rest of them, they're not going to look after the producer's interest. They're not concerned about the producer's interest. They're only concerned about their dollar and cents and what they can give back to their shareholders.

[0:36:08]

Henry Monk, who drafted the Prairie Grain Advance Payments Act, was instrumental in writing the Canadian Wheat Board Act. He was instrumental in writing the Canadian Grains Act. He also set up the Milk Board. He was a wonderful, wonderful, very smart man. He told me that if they ever changed the Wheat Board legislation, they would never, ever, ever be able to go back, you know? It's just a one opportunity that he had to write in at that time certain things that they could push through because of our position in the world trade centre. But now, with the world trade the way it is, Canada would never have a hope of ever being able to come up with things like the Wheat Board or the Milk Board or the protection agencies again. They're lost forever if they allow them to change it now. It's so--.

There's nobody left to give that message, nobody left to tell these guys. Cargill is out buying them this and buying them that and treating them as if--. They're giving them computers so that they can keep in touch, and they don't need to know anybody but Cargill, you know? It's a shame that these fellows are--. If they would only look back to--. When I first started with Manitoba Pool, they gave me a great big, huge, big, old desk with a big thick glass top, and under there, the fellows would say, "You study those forms under there and take a good look at them because they're all very, very important."

They would point out to me that there was a settlement for a carload of grain that so-and-so farmer would ship down to the Lakehead. Bottom line, he would owe $5 after shipping everything. He would lose a carload of grain. He would owe money. There were grain tickets and that where the guys would deliver 2 or 300 bushels of grain and get nothing. Just awful.

MM: So those were souvenirs of more difficult times that were there in front of you?

FV: Yeah. Those were in the '20s and the '30s, yeah.

MM: Yeah. Okay, okay. What would you like people to know most about the work that you did?

FV: I guess that what I'd--. That they're never going to get the service or the protection. They're not going to get the conveniences from a grain company that they got from the Wheat Board. They just take it for granted now. We, at income tax time, we would spend hours running statements and that for the bigger producers outlining all their deliveries and everything that they could use for taxation purposes and that. A grain company was charging $35-40 for the same information.

[0:41:00]

MM: Interesting. What are you most proud of that you did in your work?

FV: I guess the work I did with the Prairie Grain Advance Payments Act. Yeah. That was quite an experience. You know, ironically, in those days when the advance payments were doing so well, where all the problems came in the province of Alberta. We would spend--. I got—with the help of Henry Monk—I got to become known in every jurisdiction in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The Court of Queen's Bench, the Provincial Bench. Every court recognized me as a--. What was the term they used? A witness, anyway.

MM: An expert witness?

FV: Yeah, right. Yeah. An expert witness because the prosecution--. People in Alberta would purposely try to evade repayment of the advances and that. Alberta, you see, had that--. As a matter of fact, the first time I ever saw the signature of Stephen Harper was on a letterhead of the Alberta Coalition of Farmers. [Laughs] Not farmers. The Coalition of Grain Boards. Yeah. The Alberta Grain Board. They would do everything possible to interfere with the selling and the advance payments.

When we would go to prosecute in Alberta, the prosecutions were all done through the provincial people. We did not have a legal staff, the Wheat Board, so they did it through the provincial courts. And I would go out with the Wheat Board assistant lawyer just to make sure that everything was right, and he would help the prosecutor, and I would help the judge as an expert witness. I was there to explain the workings of the Wheat Board, the delivery system, and the advance payment system, and all that sort of thing to the judge so that he would get a better understanding as to how important it was that these people adhere to the rules and regulations. It got so bad in some places in Alberta that I spent the night in the Mountie barracks rather than a motel room. The Mounties would say, "Well, bunk with us."

[0:45:05]

MM: Witness protection! [Laughs]

FV: That's right. It was that bad. Alberta was real rednecks they were.

MM: Maybe we might want to talk about the question a little bit, the results of the election, and what do you see is the future of the Wheat Board? What do you predict will happen next?

FV: I'm afraid. It's going to take a long time. It won't just happen as Harper thinks. He doesn't have a magic wand, but it is going to--. First of all, they'll probably introduce a parallel system, but a parallel system will slow it down. But you can't--. Once you lose

a single desk selling operation, then you're competing like the Americans. You're competing with one another, and it's a no-win situation. So it will take a while. I would think seven, eight years from now, you'll probably see the final curtain at the Wheat Board. I would think it would take at least seven or eight years to wind it all down. Mmhmm.

MM: Okay. What is your sense of the role that you with the Canadian Wheat Board played in Canada's success as an international grain trader?

FV: Oh. I think the Wheat Board--. It wasn't just the Wheat Board alone. The Grain Commission, and the fact that we were able to work hand in hand with the Grain Commission to assure that our buyers were getting what they wanted, what they asked for, and what they paid for. We were always able to deliver good, clean grain. None of it was ever infected or anything. That's what made us so great. And then, of course, our universities here produce great grain seeds too.

Through my experience, I've seen a lot of changes. I spoke about the comptometers with the sections for bushels and pounds. Well, I had to convert from bushels and pounds to tonnes, and that was quite a job. [Laughs] Well, and then also when I started, everything was No. 1, No. 2, No. 3 Northern. Then we got into the [No.] 1 CW Hard Red Spring. You had a list like this of different grades and that. So we've all experienced great changes, but through it all the Wheat Board and the Canadian Grain Commission was able to maintain the highest possible standard for Canadian grain, and they carried it through, and they still do. Very, very few instances ever got complaints of contaminated grain or anything. They just have a record bar none. Of course, that's what they're jealous of. That's what the Americans are so jealous of.

MM: We're just wondering a little bit about the interconnectedness between the grain companies, which, with the Wheat Board and grain companies, you've talked about that a little bit. Is there anything you'd like to add there about how the Wheat Board worked with the grain companies?

[0:49:52]

FV: Well, one small part of it was, I guess, that when we were computerizing or talking about computerizing the permit book, and we also were looking at introducing a smart card system at that time—and it would have been long before the banks were talking about smart cards—the Wheat Board was talking about having that smart card system.

MM: And what--? Can you explain a bit more about that?

FV: Well, yeah. What we were talking about was a producer would have a plastic card, and he would go in and deliver his grain, and they'd put that plastic card in, and it would enter in there what he delivered, moisture, seeds, cleaning. We had all the information for that transaction in the card. It would also, at that time, go online, and it would go to the Wheat Board, and the Wheat Board would take off the daily purchases, and then by computer, we'd be able to segregate them and give each company the report on what their agents bought that day. This was--. The people we worked with were, of course, computer oriented, and it was the upper brass that we tried to kick this from because they didn't like the idea of the Wheat Board telling them what their agents had bought. They thought, "Well, if the Wheat Board's got that information, who else has got it?" There was some friction there. But mostly, the grain companies worked with us.

MM: So this system never did come to pass?

FV: It never did come to pass because of the political pressures from above.

MM: Okay.

FV: That was about 1988, a couple of months before I left.

MM: Okay.

FV: Yeah.

MM: But I interrupted you. You said generally the grain companies were very cooperative. You worked cooperatively and--.

FV: Yes, yeah. We would--. All the information was shared, and it would cost practically nothing. It was the cost factor that we thought we would win with the management teams. That's why we sort of wanted to get it all in place before management found out about it, really. But it wasn't management, it wasn't the grain companies, it was Ottawa and the political pressures from Ottawa that just didn't like the idea of the Wheat Board gaining anymore power and strength. Then they put in commissioners like Esmond Jarvis and the Ottawa-oriented people that were more inclined to worry about politics than producers. Yeah.

MM: Okay. Now, what about the interaction and interconnectedness with producers, between the CWB and producers?

FV: You mean--? Well, I guess the best story there would be the fact that we would bring in people--. When it got to the point where the Wheat Board was getting a lot of bad press, we would bring people in and give them a tour of the Wheat Board and show

them through the place and how different departments worked and that. It became very well-received. Invariably, there would be one at least once a month, a great huge group of people bustling up from the States to come and go through the Wheat Board to see what it was all about.

[0:55:28]

They knew that we had the best deal, and a lot of people in the States would have loved that deal, but of course, the American politics being the way they are, there was just no way they were going to be able to knock off the big grain companies. Archer-Daniels and those people are just too inbred into the system.

MM: Okay. Now what about in your role the interconnectedness with the carriers, the rail and the lake carriers?

FV: Well, I didn't. We have a transportation department, and that was a different group of people.

MM: And did you connect with them in some way?

FV: Oh, yes. I met with the head of our transportation department quite regularly, yeah. Let's see. I guess it's like the salespeople would make a sale, transportation water--. Transportation was water and rail, so they would start to put in place the transportation to fill that sale, and then we would have to come up with the quota system to bring that into the elevators. So that's the way we interacted.

MM: Yes. So you had to work closely. Okay.

FV: But--.

MM: Now, you've talked about changes in your workplace through computerization and so on—fascinating—are there other changes which you experienced over your career that you'd like to talk about?

FV: Well, I guess one of the things is I used to have all these numbers—it's at the tip of my tongue—but I don't have them anymore. But at one point, I think I'm correct in saying that we had something like 250,000 actual permit holders. I would think that's down now to less than 100,000 actual permit holders. We witnessed all those changes. It started out, I guess, the young fellows come back from the war had a few dollars, and they wanted to build a family farm, so they bought from their uncles and their grandfathers, and they increased the size of their farms. Then we noticed that an awful lot of these sales were to huge

corporations. They were buying the farms, and then they would put these people back as serfs to run the farms, eh? [Laughing] That's when small towns started to disappear, schools started to close, post offices started to close. That was a bad period, I think.

MM: Now, what about in crop varieties and that type of just what producers are growing, the changes that that made and the impact on the Wheat Board?

FV: Well, I guess the one that I experienced the most with would be the so-called organic growers. To me—I'm probably from the old school—but I think it's a farce this organic stuff. It gives Sobey's a good excuse to have two counters of the same celery, but one's twice the price of the other. I spoke against the organic growers because they wanted to disrupt the system. I knew that if they got their way, then you'd have 100 others that would find other excuses to break the system.

[1:01:03]

MM: Okay. So can you explain a bit more about what the organic growers were wanting?

FV: Well, they insisted that their grain not be mixed, eh? Well, the principle of the Wheat Board is to pool the grain. So they insisted that their grain be separate. So they wanted to deliver it separately, and they even wanted to bag it and ship it and sell it, but they wanted to do it all outside of the Board. Well, most people couldn't tell the difference between organic wheat and regular wheat, if there was one.

MM: What was the impact of some of these changes on your workplace, on how you did your work?

FV: Well, I think as we watched the industry sort of crumble, our enthusiasm crumbled, and it just didn't--. The other thing that changed was as things got more computerized and that, we didn't need the staff that we used to have. So they started to--. They found it was cheaper to bring people in on contract, and people would just work for six months and take off, and they couldn't care less about the Wheat Board. They were just looking for something to do for six months. It didn't help the atmosphere any to have these kind of people flying through. I don't know.

The whole industry seemed to--. The big move now is to move west. Viterra just closed their offices here, moved hundreds of people to Calgary and to Regina. It's a crime. Winnipeg is losing the whole centre. Where we used to be--. Like Ed Russenholt when he used to do the weather used to say, "The heart of the continent." It certainly isn't anymore. And the Grain Commission, I know some people who still work at the Grain Commission. It's going through the same pains, losing. I don't even think they--. We used to have in Winnipeg here a tremendous staff of inspectors in the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] yards probing cars, eh, and

taking samples and stuff. These cars don't even stop now. They just keep on going. So it just--. The changes have been--. We didn't take the right advantage of the changes, I guess. We use them to knock the system down rather than to build it up.

[1:05:32]

MM: Okay. What might you have done differently to have built it up?

FV: Well, I think for one thing, I would have really fought strongly if we had the backing of our board and of the government and the board, I would have fought really strenuously to get this computerized and smart card system going. It would have saved producers thousands and thousands of dollars. It would have made a real smooth system, but they were so determined to crush that. No, it just didn't--.

MM: How did you go about trying to sell that idea? How did you and your colleagues try to sell it?

FV: Well, from the bottom up. I would go to my boss, who later became a commissioner, and he would say, "Well, I'll take it up." But I don't think he delivered it quite the same as I did to him. You see, that's why he got to be on the board, I guess. [Laughs] It was the board that just went to pieces. The best board we ever had was Bill McNamara, Bill Riddel, Earl Robertson, Jim Lawrie. They were great, great grain men. Charlie Gibbings.

MM: And what years were they in those positions?

FV: I'll give you a copy of my form that's got them all in it.

MM: Oh, perfect. That would be great.

FV: That was in the '50s and in the '60s. It was the late '70s that it started to downturn.

MM: Started to change. Mmhmm. Other than dealing with change, which you've talked about a lot, what major challenges did you face in your job?

FV: I don't know how to answer that. Really, when things were going good, you had no challenges, eh?

MM: Okay, yes. That's--.

FV: You know? Like when things were going good, you couldn't ask for anything better. I was the happiest guy in the world. Loved going to work, loved staying at work. Lots of days worked weekends. We--.

MM: Can you share with us perhaps one of your most vivid memories and the most sort of joyous times of your work?

[1:09:59]

FV: Well, one of the things I remember, one of the best times, most entertaining times, was we used to bring groups over from Europe and all over for sales promotion, but when Expo was on in 1967, was it--?

MM: Mmhmm.

FV: In Montreal, they rented a big, big piece of Habitat, and I was picked. I was one of the fellows to go down and live in Montreal for a while and kind of coordinate and organize these people coming and going. They periodically would allow my wife to come down and spend a few days. This one time she was down, and the people that were coming in were the Mr. and Mrs. Shota from Japan. They were the mother and father of the princess that married the crown prince of Japan. They were pretty high up on the ladder there. They were travelling with Jim Lawrie and his wife, and they were a lovely, down to earth family. Beautiful family.

Mrs. Shota was concerned about her white gloved got soiled, and so my wife said to her, "Well, you can just wash them." She said, "Oh, how do you do that?" [Laughing] She had no idea how to wash. So my wife said, "Well, I'll do them for you." She said, "Well, could I watch?" [Laughs]

MM: Oh, isn't that--.

FV: And so, she said, "Yeah, you put them on to wash?" She says, "Yeah, you put them on and wash them." [Laughing] So when they left, they gave my wife a beautiful bag with a necklace in it, and it was all ivory. It was beautiful. That was my first wife. This is my second wife. I lost my first wife, and that was quite an experience for the Wheat Board too when I lost my wife. She came down with cancer, and that was in '76, I guess. That was just when all the trouble was starting to brew, and I was slated for this job of general director of the country services division. I said I didn't think I could take it because my wife was pretty sick. So they said, "Well, we'll cover the job. You look after your wife and family." They were terrific. They were, really. But going back to experiences with the Expo was a great, great experience to see these people from the different countries and how much they appreciated the Wheat Board and that.

MM: What do you think was the--? Was there a long-term impact for the Wheat Board for having participated?

FV: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure there was. Yeah, yeah. Another instance was when we moved over from--. In 1957-58, we moved over to set up the Prairie Grain Advance Payments Act in the new building. There was a fellow in the corner office, and we said, "Well, we're going to need that corner office." "Well, could you kind of work around him?" So we did. We left them in the corner office, worked around them. And it was Matveev was the Deputy Minister of Agriculture for Russia, and he had that corner office, and he worked--. Frank Rowan, I guess, if you've interviewed Frank Rowan, would tell you lots of stories about Matveev.

[1:15:38]

But to work there with Matveev, he was a great, great guy. You talk about long-term. I'm sure that someday he'll come back to Canada. He just loved the Lake of the Woods. He just thought that was great. And the biggest thing, I guess, was I think Frank it was that arranged for him to go to Churchill, and when he was up there, he saw these polar bears. By God, if they didn't give Matveev a polar bear skin. Somebody years later said that they visited Matveev after he retired from the government in Russia. They visited him at a home in the mountains, and he had a beautiful home, and above the fireplace he had this polar bear rug.

MM: And who was Frank Rowan? What was his role?

FV: General sales manager, I guess it was. He was also head of our Montreal office at one time too.

MM: Okay. Are there other questions you think we should be asking you? Other things you want to share that we haven't talked about?

FV: Mm-mm. I don't know. Well, you talk about long-lasting relationships though. I was just going to add there, I spent--. Well, they used to run these courses and CIGI, Canadian Institute of--. [Canadian International Grains Institute]

MM: Grains Institute?

FV: Yeah. The Grains Institute. They used to run these courses, and I used to speak at them periodically. Then I went on the course one time to see what other people did on the course. So I went on the course. It was an awful good experience. I met people there from all over the world, and the next Christmas we all exchanged Christmas cards, and that went on for about three years. Then it just petered out as it would. To live with those people for three weeks, we travelled to--.

MM: Can you tell us about the itinerary of this course that you did?

FV: Well, yeah. It all takes place in the Grains Institute, but you spent time at local elevators. You spent time out at the experimental farm. You go to the experimental farm in Brandon on the way to Elkhorn Ranch in--.

MM: Clear Lake? Riding Mountain National Park?

FV: Yeah, in Riding Mountain. We'd spend a weekend of golf there. [Laughs] Where else did we go? But they'd show these people an extremely good time.

MM: And who were the participants at that time in that program?

FV: Well, these are the people, in the course I was on, they were all buyers from--. Well, one fellow that I bunked with sometimes, he was--. Gosh, I can't say his name right now. But he was a rapeseed buyer for an oil company that made refined oil for watches in Germany. Yeah. He was really interesting. And then there was three or four gals on the course, and one I have seen since on television. She was Syria, from Syria. I think she went to United Nations at one time. She was a pretty smart girl.

[1:21:10]

But we met some real nice people on that course. That's a worthwhile thing. But those are the kind of things that people that don't understand that want to get rid of the Wheat Board, they just don't understand the details of what the Wheat Board did, you know?

MM: Or does. Or what the Wheat Board does.

FV: That's right.

MM: It continues to do, yeah. [Laughs]

FV: Well, yeah.

MM: So, I'll repeat again, are there any other things which you'd like us--. Or questions we should have asked, or things you'd like to share that we haven't?

FV: I can’t think of anything really.

MM: Okay. Now, you had also--. You said you do have some papers that you would like to share with us. Are there any other memorabilia or that kind of thing that you would like to share?

FV: I have some things. I have sorted them up. I’ll give you a permit book and stuff.

BC: Oh, that would be wonderful.

MM: Okay.

FV: It was one of the first permit books. The permit book changed. Every year we improved it and improved it. [Laughs] This was one of the first permit books, yeah.

MM: I might have one of those in my house too from my parents’ farm.

FV: Oh, yeah?

MM: Now, just in a broad way or more detailed if you wish, what part of the Canadian Wheat Board’s history do you think is important to preserve and share with the public?

FV: Which part?

MM: Yeah. Or what parts of the Wheat Board’s history do you think it’s important to preserve and share?

FV: You mean of physical--?

MM: Any part. It could be some of the--.

FV: Well, the Wheat Board from top to bottom should be preserved. That’s what the Wheat Board is all about is it’s one central desk selling agency, and you can’t divide it up. It’s not divisible. If you start to divide it up, it’ll fall apart. So every part of it should

be preserved. Every part of it because it’s, as I said earlier, it’s just a one *[inaudible]* opportunity. You’re not going to get a second chance to have a second Wheat Board because it’ll never, ever happen.

MM: Okay. Thank you. That was--. We appreciated your insights into parts of the operation that we learned a lot about today.

FV: Well, it’s been a real pleasure. I enjoyed it. You know, I’ve often said that somebody should be doing this because there’s not too many of us left to tell these stories.

MM: Thank you.

End of interview.