

Narrator: Brian Wick (BW)

Company Affiliations: Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, Cargill Grain, Superior Elevator

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Summary: Long-time grain handler and pellet plant operator Brian Wick describes his career in terminal grain elevators across Thunder Bay’s waterfront. He begins by discussing his 20-year period with Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, starting in the car shed of Pool 6. He explains the various jobs in the car shed and the main task of unloading boxcars and hopper cars. He lists some of the other jobs he performed as a general grain handler, moving between Pool-owned elevators, and the introduction of automation. Wick then moved to Cargill, which became Superior, and became the pellet plant operator. He describes the step-by-step process of pellet making, the day-to-day tasks, things that can go wrong in the process, and the isolation of the one-man job. He shares some of the reasons behind downsizing across the waterfront, shares the effects of downsizing on the remaining industry workers, and shares a story of his tough decision to change grain companies. Other topics discussed include learning carpentry during layoff periods, the demolition of Pool 6, the differences between Pool 6 and Superior Elevator, grain handler strikes, and changes to dangerous working conditions.

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Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: It is February 19, 2015, and this evening’s interview is taking place in the home of our interviewee. And I will have him now introduce himself and tell us a little bit about what his current job is in the grain industry.
BW: My name is Brian Wick, and I work for Superior Elevator. Right now, being winter, I’m doing a little bit of everything, but I’m in the pellet plant sometimes, and sometimes I’m an inspector’s helper. He’s on vacation right now, so I’m filling in. Next week, I’m dumping cars. So that pretty well runs the gamut there. [Laughs]

NP: Now, we talked prior to this interview, and you mentioned that you had started working in the industry in 1975. How did you get involved?

BW: Well, probably like a lot of people. I had a relative in there. My brother was working there, and so that's where I ended up going after I kind of worked at mines and papermills and worked in Dryden for a while. Finally headed back home to the big city. [Laughs]

NP: So you grew up in Thunder Bay?

BW: Grew up in Thunder Bay, yeah.

NP: And where was your brother working at the time?

BW: He was at Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. That's where I started.

NP: And what was he doing?

BW: Well, like everybody else, you see, he started off in the track shed unloading cars, jobs like that. As postings become available or other people retire, he ended up on the scale floor. I ended up on the scale floor as a helper receiving cars or loading boats, something like that, until eventually the scale floor job was no more. Everything got moved downstairs into control rooms.

NP: So let's go back to those early days. Was your brother the first one in your family who worked in elevators, or did you also, like a lot of people, have fathers and grandfathers who were in the industry?

BW: No, my brother and myself, we broke the mold. My father, he worked in the papermills here.

NP: Yes, because normally the sons follow the fathers whether it's into the papermills or forestry or the elevators.

BW: Yeah. No, I left university, went up to Ear Falls because I had an uncle there who was a foreman at the mine, at the Griffith Mine. So I worked there for a year, here, there, and everywhere, and then finally back to Thunder Bay and the elevators.

NP: When you started with Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, was that your first experience with elevators, or as a kid did you live near elevators?

BW: No. As a kid, I'd fish down at the Current River. There was an elevator there, but it didn't mean anything to me.

NP: You didn't see the ships coming in or--?

BW: When I was in high school, Hillcrest High School, you could see the ships out there. You could see the elevators. No inkling that I was going to be there for 40 years! [Laughs]

NP: That's amazing, isn't it? So can you think about what it was like when you first started? What struck you, either the noises or the sights or the smells?

BW: Well, things were changing then. I kind of missed out on—or maybe didn't miss it—but they used to dump cars. Guys had to actually go inside the cars. There was cables flying every which way. It sounded quite dangerous. So I missed that by a couple of years, I suppose. So when I got there, there was still lots of boxcars, and now I haven't seen one in probably 20 years. They were being phased out, and the tankers were coming in, which seemed a lot more logical without all the grain doors and the hammering, the nailing. Just load them in the top and crank them open on the bottom. Out the grain--. Gravity takes care of the rest.

NP: You wonder why it took so long to invent it.

BW: I wondered that. I think they used boxcars for freight and other things. I guess they were versatile that way, but it certainly wasn't the best when it came to unloading grain. Loading or unloading.

NP: Did you like the elevator when you first went there, or just grew to be comfortable with it over time?

BW: It took a while. I thought I was going to leave my first day, actually, but I didn't. [Laughs]

NP: Why did you feel that way?

BW: Well, I don't know. I guess at that age, early twenties, you're kind of feeling your way around what you want to do. I remember my first job was to--. The dumper man broke the door open on the boxcar, and I was told to go in and clean up the broken door or whatever. So I did that, and then I went to the foreman and said, "Okay, what do I do next?" He said, "That's it.

You just stay there and keep doing that.” [Laughs] So that was kind of new to me. I was used to you’ve got to keep busy, got to keep doing something.

[0:05:31]

But everybody, there was probably five or six different positions in the track shed alone. Doorman there, dumper man. There was a hook man because everything in Pool 6, the cars were brought in by cables. So somebody had to be down the track putting the big hook on the boxcar to pull it in to dump it. So there was a lot of different jobs.

NP: Was it a really physical job? Or because it wasn’t too busy it wasn’t too bad?

BW: It wasn’t too bad, actually. I’ve worked in other--. Like I say, I worked in the papermills and mines and carpentry. You can work pretty hard on those jobs. Not to say that you can’t work hard in the elevators, especially, I guess, if you’re up on a clean-up crew or something. But then again, nobody’s whipping you. You do what you can do. It was pretty good. I would say probably one of the better jobs relative to some of the ones I’d encountered.

NP: How were they unloading the boxcars then?

BW: It was predominantly boxcars. Well, at Pool 6 there was different systems than ours. A boxcar was clamped on either end, and then they just tilted back and forth. These big baffles would enter the door one way and then come out, and then the car would tilt the other way. The baffle would go in the grain back and forth five or six times, and the car was empty. Tanker cars were just starting to show up then. It was kind of a new thing, and we were opening them with a bar.

A lot of guys—not myself—but a lot of guys injured their back straining, trying to--. Not every car was easy to open. Some you had to fight with them a little bit, and there was a lot of different designs at the time of how they opened on the bottom. Some of them were pretty unpleasant trying to open them. Others were a piece of cake. “How come they’re not all like this one?” But I don’t know, something to do with patents or whatever. So.

NP: Did they have the--. What system did they have for opening the hopper cars?

BW: Well, the hoppers it was just the bar, and then they got this little portable contraption on two wheels—it ran on air—to open--. It was a little cumbersome to handle, though. Now, today, we have a buggy at Superior elevator. It just runs along the track, and

you sit inside the buggy. It's heated. Just operate--. [...*audio skips*] That's for sure. Not the injuries either, which is a big thing for companies and insurance.

NP: What was the workforce like at Saskatchewan Wheat Pool when you first started?

BW: Well, there was lots of guys. Definitely hundreds of guys at Pool 6 alone when you had three shifts going. Across the waterfront, I think we had over half of the union membership, over 1,000 employees at that time. So certainly, although it was nice for the jobs to get easier—like I was saying not having to use the bar and now you've got a machine to do the hard work—but a lot of jobs went too with all this automation, control rooms. Everything is being operated from an office. So hundreds of jobs. Like, I didn't think my job would ever disappear, but--.

NP: And which job was that, when it finally disappeared?

BW: Well, the elevator--. [...*audio skips*] Since then, so. Big changes. A lot of houses shut down, so definitely cut down on the workforce. But it wasn't just the closing of the elevators. It was the automation was a big cause too.

NP: Yeah. Well, we'll go into the automation, particularly of those floors you were familiar with, but let's just do a quick run through of the jobs that you had after your first one in the track shed.

BW: Well, after that I would get called--. When a boat came in, they needed extra help on the scale floor, so I would go up and be a scale floor helper up there on the scales. When I started, you had to actually manually put weights on a balance beam to weigh off what we call the draft of grain that was going to go to the boat. Or same with boxcars, you had to weigh those off too. But I would only go up there when they needed the extra guy, and over a period of time, maybe, a couple years, then you finally got a--.
[...*audio skips*]

Changing then. Pretty soon the scale floor had what we called consoles, kind of like huge computers compared to anything you'd see today. But you sat at those, and you could open the scales, direct the grain from where you wanted it to go from in the office. So things were changing. Every year, something new came along.

[0:11:03]

NP: Had it already converted to metric by the time you got there, or you were there for that changeover too?

BW: I believe with the balance beam and before they--. Well, they still had those. I imagine it would have had to still be imperial. Then when they brought in the consoles and automated everything, then it would have been metric then.

NP: For the 20 years that you were at Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, was it always at Pool 6?

BW: No, you had to follow your posting depending on--. [...*audio skips*] Lots of layoffs. You might be a scale floor helper, but with layoffs, you might have to follow your posting. Depending on where you are on the seniority list, you'd have to go to another house. So even though you were a scale floor worker at Pool 6, you were basically learning a new job if you had to go to Pool 7 and do the same job because they're all structured differently.

Pool 8 over on Syndicate there, in the South Ward, it was quite a tiny elevator, so you had to not just be a scale floor person. You had to make your own sets in the annex, set up the tripper to where the grain's going to go, and then go back a couple hundred feet to what you were doing, weighing off the grain or whatever. So every elevator was really like learning a new job. You knew the fundamentals of it.

NP: Well, and Saskatchewan Pool Elevators along the Kam?

BW: Well, they were taken over when I started, maybe it was just prior to that. But they did have--. I don't know how many houses they had. Searle, the Pool 15, over right next to Superior where I work now, they had that one. Then 4A and B in Current River, 7A and B in Intercity, Pool 6, Pool 8.

NP: Did they have Western? Had they taken over Western, which was the one that used to be beside Western By-Products now?

BW: Not that I know of. Western's the one on the river that you were hoping to make into a--?

NP: No. That's called Western Grain By-Products, but beside it—it's taken down now—used to be Western, one that started out its life at Western and I think became a Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. But that may have been already gone by the time you started, you being a youngster. [Laughing]

BW: Yeah, at that time, anyway.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: Liked and didn't like?

BW: Well, I liked the scale floor job. You got quite to be--. The guys you worked with, you were like a family. You had your own kitchen up there on the scale floor, so you had your regular cook ups. It was kind of like breaking up a family when that all came to an end. You all got dispersed over the waterfront. Some people retired because they were of that age to be able to maybe retire early, make room for the younger guys trying to hang on. So there was a lot of adjustments.

NP: Tell me about adjustments as best you can. Let's just deal with the scales when they went to the computerization, automation of it. Which--. [...*audio skips*] And others can't or won't. What kind of adjustments did people have to make, and what do you think the difference in the skills were needed before and after the automation?

[0:15:15]

BW: Well, I don't know. I guess every person has their different aptitudes. I guess some--. Well, a lot of things didn't come down to aptitude. It came down to seniority. Like, who got to go into the control room when now they didn't need all these scale floor people? So it was just the person who had the years in who would get that posting. Then they only need a couple guys. So if you couldn't hang on, if you didn't have the years, well, then that was kind of the end of your career. It went that way for hundreds of guys.

But getting back to what you were saying about jobs—liking jobs and not liking jobs—I was never one for working on cleaner decks. [...*audio skips*] Always kind of rattled me a little bit, all this noise. Although, I've worked on reclaims that are upstairs. They have cleaner machines, but not like a whole pile of them.

NP: What's a reclaim?

BW: Well, that's where they get the byproducts out of the--. They reclaim what's in the grain, like, the screenings that I have here. It's not whole wheat, it's not the actual product, but it gets reclaimed because it comes in, in the car. So they can use those byproducts for other purposes.

NP: So tell me how that works. I'm just thinking about the different floors in the elevators. So the byproducts and the pellets, they're made from those things that aren't the whole, saleable grain. So you get a shipment in of grain that needs to be cleaned, so-- . [...*audio skips*] Shipped out as pellets.

BW: Well, your cleaner deck or your reclaim, they clean out the screenings, wheat scalps, whatever isn't the whole grain, and it all gets collected into bins designated for that purpose. Then some of it gets shipped out on a boat. Then the dust—because you can't just put the dust in the atmosphere—they have tanks that collect the dust, but you can't make pellets out of strictly dust, so you have these byproducts which you mix in with the dust to give you something you can actually make pellets out of.

NP: So how do you collect the dust?

BW: It gets picked up by a pollution system. You've probably seen the big tanks on the outside of the elevators. It's usually green, but I guess they've been painted different colours—probably blue in some cases. Directed to holding tanks where they can mix it with screening products to make the pellets.

NP: So I'm interested physically with how the dust gets from the collecting points—those big whatever you call them, that's—how does it actually get out of there? Are they constantly emptying, or do you have to empty them after a certain time?

BW: Well, they pulse, and they shake off the dust, which goes into a rotary valve and gets carried by a screw. It gets directed to a small leg, which will take it to the bin that they want to keep it in.

NP: Are they combined in the bin with the screenings, or are--.

[...*audio skips*]

BW: Dust is-- Well, it goes to my tanks. Here I have two dust tanks. That's why, even though the pellet plant is a totally separate part of the operation, it's pretty vital because if those tanks fill up, where's the dust going to go? So they always have to be kept low. You don't want them to fill up because then if something happens, you're in trouble because there's no-- You'll pretty well have to shut the plant down because the dust has to go somewhere.

We're not doing anything right now, being winter. We're not unloading a lot of cars, and obviously not loading boats. The grain's not coming in, so we're not cleaning grain, so there's very little dust going into the tanks right now. When things get busy, those tanks can fill up pretty fast because you're getting dust from unloading, from loading boats, and from the cleaning of the grain. So every morning you come in a half hour early before they start-- [...*audio skips*] So you can tell them what the situation is as far as dust goes. Not getting into the danger zone, or if you are, you're going to be working overtime or something to get those levels down.

[0:20:38]

NP: What kind of--. Which grain products give off the most dust, and which are the cleanest?

BW: Well, we don't handle a lot--. We handle durum wheat. We handle wheat. Canola is probably the least dusty. We handle barley. Barley is probably one of your dustiest grains. That's probably what surprised me when I started in the elevators is how dusty grain is, because you don't think--. [Laughs] You think of a kernel of wheat or whatever, it just looks like a hard little pebble almost. You think, "Well, where does all this dust come from?" But from the--. [...*audio skips*] On the boat, there's another cloud of dust there. So just right from the beginning to the end of the process, there's a lot of dust.

Obviously, we don't handle corn. I think corn is one of the worst, most volatile dust there is for explosions. There's been quite a few. Every year, we have to watch this video called "Deadly Dust" at work there as part of our safety program. The corn, I think, is the most volatile of the grains out there. Well, it's not a grain, I guess, corn, but it's definitely dusty.

NP: Does it make any difference to the final pellets where the dust comes from, or dust is dust?

BW: I would say dust is dust when it comes to making pellets. Maybe somebody in a lab somewhere can break it all down and determine what constitutes it—the protein or whatever—but to my knowledge, as far as I know, it's just pellets are pellets from the dust.

NP: So we've got the dust sitting in its designated bins. We have the screenings sitting in their designated bins. So how does the process of pellets come about?

BW: Well, I've got the pictures here, but I guess that does help too much on an audio. But I have three tanks—two of them are dust tanks and one of them is screenings—and they both get mixed right at that point by a--. A screw carries the dust or the screenings, and they go up a leg together. Now they've combined right there at the bottom there. They mix together, and by the time they get elevated, they're now mixed.

NP: And that facility, the pellet plant, is an actual separate facility from the elevator?

BW: Yeah. It's very close to it, but it's behind the main plant.

NP: Does every elevator, that you're aware of, have a similar pellet-making potential?

BW: No. Like Pool 6, we never had a pellet plant. Big BFI trucks would come and haul it away to Pool 7 back in the day, and they'd make the pellets over there. I guess at one time the boiler was coal fired. I have a picture here of these massive iron doors, which is just a relic now, but it's still there.

NP: Is that part of the pellet plant operations?

BW: Well, you need the steam to make pellets, so really the boiler room is just the boiler room. It doesn't actually have anything to do with making pellets in the boiler room, but you definitely need the steam it's generating to combine with the dust to make the pellets. See, now this is beside this. This is gas-fired now, the boiler.

[0:25:10]

NP: And it's smaller and easier to feed. [Laughs]

BW: Yeah. Just like the old furnaces. People had the big octopus in their basement. Now they've got these tiny little gas furnaces.

NP: So the only other thing that goes into pellets is the moisture?

BW: It's the moisture. I always, when I worked up on the D-floor, the bin floor making sets, moving spouts, you could smell the pellet mill, and I always thought something was being combined, like a binder was being put in with it to stick it altogether. But since I've worked in the pellet plant, I've learned that it's just the steam that combines with the mixture. It's forced through a die at very high pressure and that--. The mixture is forced through this die to make the pellets. It's just pressure that holds it all together.

NP: And does it come out like big noodles?

BW: Well, they look long there, but they do end up quite short because they keep getting cut off. And then they drop down into what's called a cooler, carried from there into the elevator for storage. Kind of have a--. It's where things start. They go up the leg into your hammer mill because everything has to be smashed up. You can't have things the way they come in raw, like these screenings. Everything has to get pulverized by a set of 84 hammers that are spinning at--. I don't know at what RPM, but it's mighty fast. [Laughs]

I have one of the hammers here, which is quite worn. When they're brand new, the tip of the hammer's got a very hard type of metal on the end, and once that wears off maybe in a couple of months--. At one point, you can reverse the hammers to wear it the other way, but eventually that hard tip wears off, and before long your hammer can end up looking like a butter knife. [Laughs] So that's how abrasive it is.

NP: So what would the tip of that be like when it was new? Would it be squared off?

BW: Square like this end, but like I say, it has this very hard--. And I don't know what it is. [Laughs]

NP: Maybe even a carbide like they--.

BW: Something like that.

NP: Hm!

BW: But it's surprising. When we're busy, maybe two months—three at the most—you have to change the whole set. The sets are balanced, and it gets very critical that everything be perfectly balanced because everything's flying around at such high speed. You're going to end up with vibration, and if you have that, well, you've got a problem, and you've got to shut her down and find out why it's vibrating. Like I say, it's 84 hammers flying around at a very high RPM. So, once it gets smashed up into your--.

NP: And what is it getting smashed up in? Is it a big vat or--?

BW: It's called your hammer mill. I was mentioning how the dust and screenings get elevated, and they go into a large hopper up above the hammer mill, and they get fed into a feeder, which feeds it into where the hammers themselves are. Then it's basically dust, and an air system carries that dust up and over to another holding tank called your pellet mill, another big hopper. And from there, a screw feeds that mixture and mixes it with steam, and it goes into a mixer and gets fed into the die that I was talking about and forced through the die, which makes the pellets.

NP: Almost like a pasta maker.

BW: Probably. [Laughs]

NP: When you call it a screw, an auger?

[0:30:01]

BW: An auger, yeah. It just carries it along. It's the way they move a lot of product in the elevators. Well, mainly conveyor belts, but then cleaner decks and other various parts of the elevator, including the pellet mill, they use this auger idea to move the product through the pellet mill and into the die.

NP: Yes. I was watching the 100 most important inventions on TV the other night, and the auger was right up there near the top of inventions.

BW: Yeah, yeah. I can understand that. It's kind of an ingenious way of moving product. It just keeps revolving. It looks like something that's moving forward, but it's just revolving on the spot, and yet the product is getting moved ahead.

NP: So it comes out of the die apparatus, and is it still pretty liquidy?

BW: No. By then it looks like a pellet. Once it gets forced through that die, it's quite warm—hot, even—then it drops into what's called the cooler below before it gets transported. I didn't take a picture of the cooler, but it just drops into the cooler, which is kind of like a fairly small hopper. And from there, it gets carried again by screws to a small leg, which elevates it to the top of the annex where there's three bins designated strictly for storing pellets. Although, once those fill up, then they'll pull the pellets out of there and put them somewhere else in the elevator waiting to ship them out by rail or boat.

NP: And what are they used for? Who are the customers, do you know?

BW: Well, there's a company, London Ag, I believe it's called. Ag for something. Trade X is another. I guess companies buy them. They find buyers. They may not be using them themselves, but they find buyers for the product. Feed. I'm not sure what type of animal it's used for, whether it's pigs or what type of animal eats these pellets. But once it's out of the elevator, it's like a lot of the product that goes through the elevator. Once it's on the boat or wherever, it's sort of out of sight, out of mind. But it would be interesting, probably, to know where--. Like I always find it interesting when we have salties. Where in the world is this stuff headed to? Literally, where in the world is it going?

NP: And do pellets go on salties, or are they mostly lakers?

BW: I don't really know for sure. [Laughs] Like I say, once it's gone, it's kind of--. We don't ship very much by boat, really.

NP: Would it go east and west from here, or just mainly east?

BW: I'm guessing mostly east, but it probably could just as well go west. I mean, there's an awful lot of livestock out west, whether it goes there. Now you're making me curious. I think I'm going to have to start asking more questions.

NP: I'm curious.

BW: Instead of just making the pellets, say, "Where is this--? Why am I making it?"

NP: So when everything is operating well, everyone is happy. What can go wrong in that operation? You talked about the hammers wearing and perhaps getting unbalanced. What else can go wrong?

BW: It seems an awful lot can go wrong because you've got your boiler. You can have problems with that, and that always requires expertise to bring in somebody from outside, a contractor, whose people know boilers and how everything operates there. Oh, we have electrical problems. That's pretty regular. Certainly, the weather plays havoc with a lot of things, and just the wearing out of equipment. When you have a new die--. Like the die itself wears out. The holes get bigger, and the outside of it starts to deform over time. That's a pretty big job and a pretty big expense to replace a die. And the hammers, probably less of an expense, but still, it's downtime. It's something that has to be done. Oh, lots of things. Like I say, weather does play a big part sometimes in things not working the way they should.

[0:35:25]

NP: Do they use this time of year--. Or really there's only about, what, two months in a good year—three months maybe—in a good year when they aren't shipping and perhaps they aren't--. Well, mainly when they're not shipping. So is there enough time there to overhaul and do whatever kinds of repairs need to be done to the pellet plant then? Or are you still operating your--?

BW: Well, that is an ideal time. Like we've some leaks on our steam line outside and ice is building up, but we had to keep making pellets because we were unloading grain. Like I was saying earlier, we can't let the dust build up to the point where we have no room to put it, so you just let that more or less leak. So there was ice building up everywhere. But finally, when we had an audit right at the end of the year, once the audit was over, the millwrights were able to go in and strip all this insulation off the steam pipes and find the leak and put new pipe in there, and then put new insulation over it again, wrap it up. But it seems quite often things break down. It could be in the middle of the summer. You just don't know when things are going to happen.

NP: Is it heated in there?

BW: It is heated. But I was talking to a fellow today. I asked him if he went up to check a pail where there's a drip, and the pail fills up in a couple of days. I said, "You've got to go up there and empty that pail if you have the time." He says, "Yeah, I went up there." He says, "The pipes are all frozen." "Oh." So I guess the heat wasn't enough. I guess with this extreme cold we've had, there's heaters in the pellet mill where these pipes are--.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: He was looking at.

BW: Well, it's just a five-gallon pail where there's been a drip. I got the millwrights to change a valve there about two weeks ago, and that drip started. But there's another hose that we let it drain into a pail that you open at the end of a shift, and you leave it open. But because the boiler runs constantly all winter, we can't shut it down. Like in the summer at the end of the shift, we'd shut the boiler off, but in the wintertime once it gets cold, that boiler has to run 24/7 so it doesn't freeze up.

So there's this valve that we open at the end of a shift or at the end of a season, and it drains into a pail, but it shouldn't really be draining now, but I guess somewhere steam is finding its way through. It's such a slow drip, you'd think, "Well, that will never fill up in a day or a week," but it does. Just like they say, "If your faucet is dripping, it's going to--." [...*audio skips*] Very slow drip there. But now, I guess, the pail is not filling up because the pipes are frozen. So now that's a whole different situation. So like I was saying, it's like, if it's not this, it's that. Something always seems to be happening.

NP: What's it like in the summer working in the pellet plant?

BW: Well, certainly summer anywhere in the elevators is better than winter. You're just busier because you have boats and cars and cleaning going on. Your dust tanks are filling up a lot quicker, so you could spend a couple evenings during the week. We only have a day shift. Even if there's two shifts dumping cars and loading boats, there's usually just one shift making pellets, but you might have to come back for five hours extra, maybe even a couple times a week just to keep those dust tanks from filling up.

NP: So with the steam, it doesn't get overheated in the summer because it's still--?

[...*audio skips*]

BW: Mill itself, we keep those open in the summertime. It keeps it pretty airy in there. But definitely hotter compared to fall or winter.

NP: Is it a very dusty place to work, or everything is pretty much enclosed?

BW: Well, once--. You have your duties in the morning to carry out. You have to do chemical tests in the boiler on my water, make sure all my readings are correct for sulphites and about three or four different tests we have to do.

[0:40:16]

NP: Where do the sulphites come from?

BW: Well, I guess in the water. I don't know what happens in a boiler with our water and getting made into steam, but we have water softeners. These are things that are--. [...*audio skips*] Your boiler has to be kept in top-notch shape too to do its job.

NP: So that's the first thing you do in the morning is come in and do those tests?

BW: Yeah. Every morning, I come in a half hour early, like I said, before the plant starts up so I can check my dust tanks to see if they're low or getting high. Then every morning you have to do your water tests in the boiler to start your day off, and then you have to go up and do various tasks in the pellet mill itself. You have magnets to clean because the product going through the hammer mill, before it goes into the hammer, there's a magnet. You don't want any metal going into that. It could damage the hammers. And you have screens in there. If a bolt or something gets through, it can tear a big hole in that screen. So it's more downtime and more money.

NP: Is it usual that the magnet collects very much?

BW: Well, you clean it--. [...*audio skips*] A few washers or the odd bolt that gets picked up there.

NP: Anything unusual? Somebody's--. Well, it wouldn't be a gold tooth, but somebody's tooth filling? [Laughing]

BW: No, I haven't found anything too exotic. It's usually the same old same old. But you do all these things in the morning, and once you start making pellets, you spend the better part of your day in the office, which is air conditioned, which is probably not so

much for your benefit as the equipment can't be too hot or it's probably not going to function properly. But mainly you're watching all these dials and gauges throughout the day. So you don't really have to do so much physical until the end of the day when you have to open the door and clean your die out and get ready for the next day.

You can't just shut down the pellet mill at the end of the day and leave it because those pellets that are in the die will harden like rock, and then your next morning you're going to have--. [...*audio skips*] At the end of the shift, we pour a five-gallon bucket of oil pellets that we put—food grade mineral oil in the pellets—and we pour that into the die. We restart the die, and it goes around for a few seconds, and these oil pellets get driven through the die so you're in good shape to start up the next day.

NP: And what happens to those particular pellets?

BW: Well, they just get fed right into the stream because the oil, it's food grade. All oil in the elevator that comes into contact with the grain—this just started a few years ago—has to be a food-grade oil, mineral oil. Yeah.

NP: What kind of training did you have to take to operate a plant?

BW: Right here. [Laughs] About a couple dozen pages. It does take a while because some jobs in the elevator--. [...*audio skips*] I shouldn't say 15 minutes because if you haven't done it before, it's something new, and it might take you a few days. Usually every guy I've ever trained, usually by the third day they're ready to go down to the office and sign off on the spout job or the dumper man job or the switchman job. Whereas the pellet plant, it's going to take you probably a few months to really get it, and even then, you're just beginning to learn. There's so much. It's almost an instinct. Like when you're sitting there in your office, something it's just a change in frequency, a sound that tips you off that something's not right. Something's gone empty or something, just like that. So it's not all just reading the manual. It's a lot of hands-on learning. A lot of things can go wrong that aren't in the manual that you just kind of have to find out.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: Involved in the pellet plant? Like how that became your specialty area?

[0:45:08]

BW: Well, I'm not the pellet operator now, but what happened was when we merged with P & H [Parrish & Heimbecker]—Cargill and P&H merged to become Superior—five, six guys took a buyout, and one of them was the pellet plant operator. So that posting

came open, and everybody always seemed—the few guys that had been pellet plant operators that I had known—never seemed to have any complaints, all seemed to love the job. So I thought, “Well, I’m going to apply for it,” and I ended up getting the job, and I learned the job. I did it for a while.

What I found about it is it’s quite isolated. Like I said, it’s not a direct part of the grain operation in that. I’m not really one of these smartphone people. I guess you can keep in contact with the whole world if you want to, even from a little office, but I found it kind of-- I never really thought of myself as a social butterfly or anything like that, but I felt I was in solitary sometimes up there. [Laughs] It’s not the kind of job you can walk away from because that pellet mill can, for whatever reason, can kick out on you. Like I say, you don’t--

And then, a very big concern with the company is fire, because there are high temperatures involved, steam. So it’s not like you can go running around the elevator, even if you’re not terribly busy. If you’re making pellets, you have to be there. So you’re kind of confined to that location for your eight-hour shift there.

NP: Is it a one-person operation?

BW: It is a one person doing that job for-- I talked to one of-- [*...audio skips*] And he says, “Well, most of the guys that have worked up there have been a little different.” [Laughs] So maybe you have to be that type of person who really doesn’t mind that kind of. Or maybe if you get a lot of visitors, but most people got their-- Other people have their jobs too, so they don’t have a lot of time to be visiting you. The oiler might pop in once in a while because he had oiling to do, screws that have to be greased and that around the pellet plant. So you see the odd face, but it’s different. Not something I even thought of when I put in for the job.

But I still do the job when they need somebody. A guy’s on holidays, I’ll go there for a couple weeks in the summertime and fill in or for overtime. Guys don’t want to spend their whole lives there, so I’ll go there and work an overtime shift. [*...audio skips*] The job I was doing in the day shift and go work in the pellet plant. Once you’ve learned it, you don’t really want to lose it because you have learned a lot. It is quite an interesting operation. Just--

NP: Just not a steady diet of it.

BW: Yeah, and I find that-- [Laughs]

NP: Unless you want to be alone.

BW: I kind of find that with a lot of jobs that I've done in the elevators. Inspection is another one where you don't really want to just be there all day. That's another one where you can be--. Well, you have less mobility, really, in inspection than you do in the pellet plant. You're in the inspection office, and you're pretty much confined to that space as well. So I've been doing that job this week, but I don't mind doing it for a week here and there. But I kind of like the variety. I'm kind of on the move. [Laughs]

NP: I can't recall if you answered what is your favourite job.

BW: Well, probably going back to the old days at Pool 6, probably working on the scale floor because of the camaraderie with your fellow workers. It wasn't just work. It's not just a job there. But there's been better jobs and worse jobs. I used to operate the front-end loader. I still do sometimes. That's kind of a novel job, whether you're doing something in the summertime moving piles of grain, or wintertime moving snow. It's just another--.

NP: Why would you be moving piles of grain with a front-end loader?

BW: Well, if there's spills. Sometimes things happen, and you have to go clean up a pile. Or you might just be cleaning up--. What should I call them? I was going to say shit piles. [Laughs] But you know, dirty grain that guys who are cleaning will dump pails and pails outside. They build up after a while. It can be quite significant piles, so you get the front-end loader out, and you carry it with the loader to a field, and we just spread it out in the field. Everything grows quite well. [Laughs] That can be pretty rank smelling stuff. Yeah, it's not a bad job either.

[0:50:41]

I used to be a dryer man, and that was another lonely job, though. We haven't had to dry grain in many years, but that's another job where you're similar to the pellet plant in that sense. It's pretty much isolated from the rest of the elevator when you're a dryer man. Then there's the dumper man. A lot of guys don't like that job because you're sitting in a buggy all day, and that can be kind of hard on the muscles, sitting all day, too.

A good job is being a switchman because you're out in the fresh air. Well, a great job in the summertime. You're out in the fresh air. It's probably the worst job in the wintertime because if the railway is pushing in cars and it snowed out, you have about a dozen switches that have to be cleaned because you have to be able to throw the switches. So probably not the best job to have in the wintertime.

NP: One of the questions we have is what kind of changes did you go through in your career? And from what you've said so far, one of the major changes was just the downsizing of the workforce. What was it like to go through that?

BW: Well, it was pretty stressful because you're kind of in the middle of raising a family, at the time, when all of a sudden everything starts falling apart. You've got a mortgage. You've got a couple kids, and now you don't have a job. You heard things were changing, and you think, "Well, yeah, but there's 600 guys under me." But then, lo and behold, the day does come, and your job is gone too. So the union and the company, they got together, and they sponsored some various seminars to try to get you back into the workforce. Between Sask Wheat Pool and working full time at Cargill, I ended up getting into a carpentry apprenticeship. So in the winters when I was laid off, it was arranged with EI that you could collect unemployment and go to school in the wintertime.

So I did that for three winters. I got through my carpentry schooling. So I don't know. It just gives you some hope anyways that you're going to have something there to be able to put food on the table. I had some good jobs in carpentry. It was all industrial, sometimes at the papermill or Coastal Steel somewhere, working there to put food on the table, I guess, it what it comes down to.

NP: Well, and build a decent skill too that's useful.

BW: Well, I built this house. [Laughs]

NP: Yeah, great! Was it hard on friendships?

BW: Well, for sure. Like, unless you were really close friends, I guess you're going to stay in contact with someone. But for the guys, maybe you never thought of them as your friends, but afterwards, you realize that these were the people you saw everyday. I guess they were your friends. You're almost like a family outside of your family. You might run into people over at the grocery store over the years and, "How are things going?" But I still wonder where certain faces, where guys ended up. I haven't seen them in many years, but everybody, they just find their own way. Some of them probably left the city.

But at that time when things were getting bad, there wasn't--. The oil jobs that are there today for a lot of fellows here in Thunder Bay, I guess, are commuting to Alberta or Saskatchewan to work. But then, just the economy just wasn't booming anywhere. So you just had to do what you could to--.

[0:55:09]

NP: Yeah, the papermills were closing down about the same time.

BW: Yeah. Yes. Thunder Bay Mill, where my father had worked, it's no longer--. It's still there, but it's shut down. Provincial Mill is gone. Mission Mill is gone. Yeah, it's just Resolute is about the only one still going.

NP: Was there any thought, or did you think at all about why it was happening? Did you think any particular sector or any particular sector of the grain industry was to blame? What were your thoughts on that?

BW: Well, I think there was a political thing. We used to have 60 percent of the grain here in Thunder Bay, and Vancouver would get about 40 percent. Then it changed there, oh, maybe back in the '80s, and a larger volume started heading to the West Coast. Now, I suppose markets, but then I wonder if a certain amount of that might have been political, being such a large city, it could probably use a lot more for their economy to have more grain moving through their port. But that's just a personal something that--. Like I say, you try to answer these questions like, "Why is this happening?" But there were a lot of factors, I'm sure. There isn't just one answer.

NP: What was the company saying at the time? Or were they saying anything?

BW: They weren't saying very much, really. They didn't seem to have a lot of respect for the workers, it seemed to me. Because I had to make a tough decision at one point because I was working at Sask Wheat Pool and Cargill, both elevators at the same time, and I was told at Cargill that they didn't want me making this commute across town everyday from over there in Chippewa basically across town to Current River. Whether they had the right to tell me I could or couldn't, I decided, well, I've been all these years with Sask Wheat Pool. Probably the smart play is to stay there with my benefits and my vacation and all those years that I had in there.

So I quit Cargill and stayed with Sask Wheat Pool because I went to management at Sask Wheat Pool and asked them what they saw down the road, and they basically didn't tell you anything--what would be the good way to go. [Laughs] They didn't say, "We can't see you being called back next spring, so you better stay where you are." Something like that would have been very helpful, but as it turned out, you just had to make your best guess on what information you had. Like I say, that's where my years were and my benefits and vacation and so on, so it made sense to stay there because we were really busy at the time. It just looked like things would pick up in the spring where we left off at freeze up.

But it didn't turn out that way. So I was fortunate to get recalled to Cargill. So I had to start over day one again, but at least I had a job. It was slow to start out. There were some bad years, long layoffs, because there were some droughts and that out west, but

eventually I got to be pretty much full time. Now that I am fulltime, and it's 40 below out there, I don't know if it's to be wished for, [laughing] but I can't complain. It's a paycheque.

NP: So tell me about the closing down of Pool 6.

BW: Well, it was sad to see Pool 6 go because that was kind of my home base. It was a nice place to work. I liked the layout of it and the people there. Everything was a little more laidback. The *retirement house* seemed to be what it was called at other elevators. Like Pool 7 was kind of a crazy place. Things were just way different tempo there. They moved a lot of grain there, dumped a lot of cars in a day, and boats were just steady. I went to the scale floor there, and it was a little bit to juggle compared to-. It wasn't this nice little family like we had at Pool 6.

[1:00:01]

NP: So what would make the difference? Was it a different mechanical operation that allowed them to work faster? Was it the kinds of grain they were handling?

BW: Well, I guess they got definitely a lot more capacity to take the grain in. They had a lot more room, so they had a lot more cars. On any given day, they got the bulk of the cars to unload. Everything had to be done pretty quick because boats, they've got to get loaded. They can't be sitting out there for days waiting. So it was a different--. It was sort of a bit of a challenge at the time. It seemed like quite an adjustment, but looking back, it was good to be challenged like that.

NP: So where were you when they imploded Pool 6? Nowhere to be seen?

BW: I was down on Court Street somewhere parking to try to get a view of the explosion going off. [Laughs] I think I was laid off. It was quite cold that time. I guess I would have been at--. I don't even know what year that was, but I imagine I was at Cargill. Was I? I don't remember.

NP: I think it was around 2000.

BW: Okay.

NP: I think.

BW: I would have been with Cargill then, but I was laid off at the time.

NP: So you never did see it?

BW: I saw the explosion because I was laid off, so I was able to take the time to go down and watch it. Whereas if I was at work somewhere, I probably wouldn't have seen it. But yeah, I saw all these little puffs of smoke come out of the side, and down she went. [Laughs] Yeah, that was sad. It was--. You knew what the public didn't know. To the public, it was probably just an eyesore from Hillcrest Park. Like, "Let's get that thing out of there." But I saw how it was built, and to me, it was like a cathedral or pyramid.

You look at the engineering many decades before, the work that went into it, and that was made from tiles, that particular elevator. The only one of its kind. So you thought, "Well, the general public doesn't really see what happened here today." They're all probably clapping their hands probably, but to me, I probably shed a tear because I worked there for a lot of years. It was a good house to work at.

I liked the layout of it. It probably could have had a better set up for the way the cars were brought in. They were brought in on three of the four tracks. A car had to be brought in by cable one car at a time, which was kind of slow, eh, bringing one car in. Where it's better to just have all the cars brought in, pushed to the back, and then kicked out the front. Makes things go a lot faster. So maybe probably in that one respect it wasn't a great layout, but other than that, I really liked working there.

Plus, it was right in the city, which was close to my home. I used to walk to work. I'd bicycle to work. Now I'm 20 kilometres to work, so I'm not walking. Biking, I've tried that once or twice, and it's a bit of a trek, especially at the end of the day. Maybe the mornings in the summer it's cool, but after working eight hours, you don't really want to be biking home in 80-degree weather. [Laughs] So Pool 6 definitely was good in a lot of ways.

NP: Now you've become familiar with Cargill, which was Grand Trunk, which was about the same time not too much difference in age to Pool 6. What do you think of the structure of the old Grand Trunk/Cargill?

BW: Well, it was quite different from Pool 6. The walls, once you get above the bin floor at the Grand Trunk Elevator, the walls are all just corrugated metal instead of concrete, which was quite different. In the summer, it can get quite hot in the annexes because it's like an oven because the sun hits that metal and gives off a lot of heat. Whereas concrete, you know, it can be like a basement. It can be quite cool, even in the hotter weather.

The other thing, I don't know who engineered the Grand Trunk railway, but the hoist that carries the workers up to the floor that they're working on, it only goes as high as the scale floor. So if you want to go to the top floor, you have to go up two long flights of stairs to finish the deal. Whereas Pool 6 and every other elevator I ever worked at, the elevator goes right to the top floor. So it was kind of an oddity there.

[1:05:25]

NP: Which makes me think. I've climbed elevator stairs—not necessarily because I want to [laughs]—but it makes me think of possibility for danger. Were you ever--. Was it a pretty safe place when you were working there?

BW: I always thought it was pretty safe.

NP: I mean not just there, but during your career in the other places too.

BW: At all the elevators I worked at, they had a little gadget—for lack of a better word—called a jack ladder, which once you got up to the bin floor, you would stand on this belt that had a single step on it. You would step onto that and hold on, and it would carry you through a hole in the next floor, and you could step off if that was the floor you were going to or hang on and go up another floor or two. So that was very convenient, especially if you were on a couple different levels. So it was pretty handy. You didn't have to use the stairs and wear yourself out. Just step on the jack ladder, pull the rope, and up you'd go.

But I guess one winter, somebody—maybe somebody heavier—stepped on it, and I guess with the frost and that, it slipped, and he fell and got injured. Didn't get killed but was injured. It just seemed to be like a domino effect after that. Every elevator, I think, on the waterfront took out their jack ladder. I've often thought, "If somebody slips on the stairs, are they going to take out all the stairs?" [Laughs] You know? So I thought maybe they could have made things a little safer or different rules of when you can use it, maybe some more cautions, but not just to throw the baby out with the bathwater. So I really thought that was sad.

And that was to get you up, and you could go down by getting on like a fireman's poll. [...*audio skips*] You know, put your legs around it and hang on. I think there was an injury or two or someone didn't hang on too good or something and ended up on their back. Again, no fatalities but injuries, so all of those poles came out as well. So it made it a little harder to get around. You either had to take the hoist or start climbing stairs. So that was another change that came along probably about 20 years ago. So I kind of miss that too because I still do work up on those floors. Yeah, I've had some knee trouble. So a lot of times I'll say, "Well, I've got to go up the next floor? I'll just wait until the hoist comes up, and I'll take the hoist to wherever I'm going."

NP: And all of those hoists are pretty slow, are they not?

BW: Yeah, they don't move very fast. Sometimes if somebody else is using it or the millwrights, contractors, have to bring up equipment, you might have to wait for a little while, plus, for it to come from the bottom up to the bin floor.

NP: There are all of the mostly the original equipment? I'm just thinking of the one from Western Grain By-Products. It looks to me like it's original to when the elevator was built.

BW: Yeah. I think the only one, I think, that was newer was when I worked at Saskatchewan Pool 4B. It looked more like an elevator you might find downtown at a department store or something. So that was probably more of an upgrade there.

NP: Well, let me take a look at my questions here and see how we're doing. I think we're--.

BW: Okay.

NP: Besides dealing with changes that you've talked about, were there any other challenges you faced on the job?

BW: Changes, challenges? Well, always learning a new job was a challenge. I put in for a lot of postings over the years. That was probably the biggest challenge was just getting over the learning process. Certainly, being laid off is a challenge, [laughing] because that's always a little tough when your income gets slashed, and you have to put in your waiting period, of course, where you don't get anything at all. But you always got through it. My son played minor hockey when he was a boy, and we always got him to the tournaments in Minneapolis or Winnipeg or Fort Frances, Dryden, wherever. So we always seemed to manage to get by. Looking back, sometimes you wonder how, but we didn't seem to suffer. [Laughs]

[1:10:36]

NP: I can remember some people—because I knew various people working in the grain trade—those who weren't working in it had the impression that the people who got laid—*[likely a comment about going south for the winter. Editor NP]*. [...*audio skips*] That has not been your experience.

BW: No, certainly not. I mean, legally, you're not allowed to leave the country if you're collecting EI, so it wasn't an option anyways, but it certainly wouldn't have made any difference to me because I wasn't going anywhere. [Laughs] I had bills to pay.

NP: That's the young guys. The young guys with no families, right?

BW: Well, I know my scale-floor boss back at Pool 6, he used to--. He didn't have a mortgage. He wished he was laid off. He wished the union would allow him to take the layoff and let the young guys that are just starting out with the mortgage and the family, let them work, which probably would have sat well with a lot of guys. But that would never fly because with EI, you would be--. If you weren't working and you chose not to work, well, they're not going to be paying you anything. So that was kind of a pie-in-the-sky--.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: Still ongoing. What would be your most vivid one or two memories, would you say?

BW: Well, certainly Pool 6 getting blown up. I can still remember that vividly. You knew that was never going to reopen. [Laughs] Sometimes you'd hope. Like sometime, "Maybe someone will come to their senses and get that place going like some elevators have." One fellow tried to get Pool 15 going, not as an elevator but as making wooden pellets. That didn't go over too well. But anyways, I guess you always hope. But once it blew up, it was finished. Time to move on. Other than that, I don't know. I haven't had a strike in quite some time, which is good.

NP: Did you live through a strike?

BW: Probably had a good three strikes back--. [...*audio skips*] You know, you'd be at the burning barrels early in the morning with your picket sign.

NP: How did you feel about those?

BW: Well, I think that's when I used to wonder what kind of future do you have in the elevators, and I took quite a few night courses thinking I might have to have a Plan B here. So I went back and got my high school math and my 13 physics, just trying to be prepared just in case. So that was, yeah, it's always a little worrisome when you realize your income can just be gone like that. You don't know how long a strike's going to carry on. Usually, it was never more than a few weeks. It just makes you really feel vulnerable. "Are they going to find another market or put everything through the West Coast and Churchill? Maybe start heading across the border with the grain or something?"

[...*audio skips*]

...that are starting out today, I don't know what lies ahead for them. There certainly are no guarantees. It seems the only thing you can be certain about in this industry is change. There's been lots of that in my 40 years.

NP: So what were you thinking of when all of these—and it's when I started to become aware of the grain industry here through this project—all the amalgamations, the Pools disappearing? Did you keep track of that? Was there anything going through your mind about those kinds of changes that were far beyond anything that you could do about them?

BW: Well, you're always kind of looking over your shoulder, but with Cargill being an American outfit, you always felt kind of secure that they were kind of different than the Pools out west and that. You were kind of separate from that. We were very automated. We were the most automated elevator on the waterfront, so we didn't need as many workers, but if you happened to be one of those--. [...*audio skips*] Like now today, some elevators are just carrying out automation, so that's probably going to hurt some guys in the next little while. Yeah. It's just life, I guess. You can't freeze anything. Change is part of the process, so you kind of roll with the punches, and usually you come out alright in the end.

[1:15:43]

NP: So when you left Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, was it still Saskatchewan Wheat Pool?

BW: Yeah, it was still Sask Wheat Pool. I don't know how many names it's had since then.

NP: Just one.

BW: Just Viterra, and Glencore now.

NP: Glencore, but they're keeping the old name.

BW: Yeah. So yeah, it hasn't had as many name changes as Great Lakes Paper. [Laughing]

NP: Or United Grain Growers [Laughs]

BW: Yeah. Well, that's when it kind of got confusing. You were asking me about these changes and what I saw coming and that, but it got so you couldn't see it coming. Like, I thought Sask Wheat Pool—Viterra—was in quite dire financial straits, and then

next thing, they're buying out Grain Growers or whatever. It's like you couldn't really predict anything. The ones you thought weren't maybe going to be players anymore are right up there, so. Yeah, I don't know what goes on in the board rooms. We just--.
[Laughs]

NP: Would that be a topic of discussion at lunchtime, or people sort of just thought, "Well--.?"

BW: Well, there's always someone with an opinion and thinks they have the inside scoop. It used to be kind of a joke that you'd say, "Well, if you want to find out what's really going on in the elevator, go down and ask the basement sweeper what's going on."
[Laughs] Because everybody had a different idea of who's--. But I remember an electrician way--. [...*audio skips*] Fine or nothing had changed yet, but he was preaching gloom and doom because, I guess, being an electrician, he knew about all these projects that were coming up, all the wiring they were going to have to do to bring the scale floor down to a control room.

So I've always remembered his words of gloom and doom that, "You guys, you better watch out. It's coming." So, "Okay. Well, I can't do anything about it, so let it come." [Laughs] It was kind of dire. It didn't make you feel too good about the future, but.

NP: Would you have, when you look back now on all of those changes, all of the uncertainties, what's your thought about the decisions you made to essentially stay in the industry in spite of having the possibilities of moving into some other adventure?

BW: Well--. [...*audio skips*] Worked at the Griffith mine up at Ear Falls, and after I'd left there, some years later I heard that the mine was being loaded onto railcars and taken to Thunder Bay to be put on ships and taken to Australia. I went up there to fish in Bruce Lake some years later, and you'd never, ever guess there was a mine there. It was all just returned to nature again. So that wouldn't have been the place to stay either, you know? [Laughs]

So yeah, I've looked back at different jobs I've had. I left the mine. I went to work in Dryden as a heavy equipment trainee at a company called Sheridan Equipment out of Toronto, and it's no longer in Dryden. So that wouldn't have been the place to stay either. I don't know. They say the only security you'll ever have is between your two ears. [Laughs]

NP: Have you been happy with the work?

BW: Expect the worst, plan for the worst, hope for the best. [Laughs] It hasn't been that bad. I like to work hard, and if you don't mind that--. I don't care for just sitting for eight hours. You usually feel better about doing something physical. So. I had a friend who worked one day in the elevators, and he got the heck out of there. He said, "I'm not doing this for the rest of my life."

Although, you don't usually end up doing that particular job for the rest of your life, but anyhow, it's not for everybody. But it's not the worst job in the world either. I've had a lot harder jobs.

[1:20:34]

So it's been pretty good. My wife and I've been married--. If I worked there 40 years, I've been married 39 years. Two kids. They're both doing well. Well, we started out in an apartment for three years, then we got a starter house for ten years, then we bought a new home, lived there for ten years, then built this house. We've been here 15 years. So it hasn't really been all that bad when you look at the big picture looking back.

NP: Mmhm. Now, in talking about looking at the big picture, I'm going to ask you to look at an even bigger picture—and I don't know if you have a comment on this—but Canada is an internationally respected grain trader, has done very well in spite of geographical challenges, climate challenges, and so on. Do you see that what you did made any contribution to Canada's success as a grain trader?

BW: Well, I would have to say it did because, obviously, as you said, the grain trade is a big part of Canada, why we need the railway out west—a good part of it anyways. The thing is we do our jobs, and it would have been interesting, I think, to know a lot more about the grain beyond our borders once it was loaded on those ships. I always thought it interesting looking at these people on the boats. “What are their lives like? Where are their families? Where is this grain going to?” But it certainly is a hungry world out there, so I think Canada will be moving grain for a long time to come.

NP: And your little piece, how do you think that contributed? Could you have done things differently that would have helped destroy Canada's reputation?

BW: Well, you have to, certainly, do your job. Maybe not everyone wants to do things by the book, but there are right ways and wrong ways of doing things. Like you say, you're only a small part of it, but you have to do your part. You have to do it to the best of your abilities so that you're happy with your--. Every day when you come home, a hard day's work for a fair day's wage. Yeah, so I've always felt good about my contribution to the whole. I never really thought of it in such broad terms, but yeah, I think I've carried my weight.

NP: And that leads into another question. Looking back on that long career, what are you most proud of?

BW: I think just getting up and going to work every day, whatever the job. Sometimes the jobs weren't the best job, but you just go to work, and you do what your job is. You look at a lot of other people out there, the jobs they're doing, some people are working a lot harder and making a lot less money. So for what we have to do, I think we're getting paid a good wage. Sometimes you have to fight a little bit for it, but we haven't been on strike for quite a long time now. I think the companies, they're making their money. They know you have to make a living too.

[1:25:12]

Certainly, if you're not making a cheque and spending it in the economy, then it's going to hurt the whole economy. People have to be able to buy what's out there, whether it's cars or homes or a million other things. You have to have a decent wage to be able to put that money back into your community.

NP: One final question about the changes because there was, when you started out, a really very busy time in the industry.

BW: Yeah, it was the busiest. Yeah. We haven't moved those kinds of volumes in recent years, even though we have better years lately. Certainly, not like it was back in the '70s.

NP: And then you went through the drop off you mentioned earlier with the shifting out to western markets. How are you feeling about things now, especially after the Wheat Board no longer playing the role?

BW: Well, I don't know what the politics is that--. I thought the Wheat Board was gone, but it owns the elevator next-door to us now. So whatever--.

NP: A very different operation.

BW: Yeah, for sure.

NP: Is it an optimistic place to work have you found nowadays?

BW: I think this merger with P&H and Cargill, I think it's put a little brighter outlook on things. We're busier because we don't just have to have Cargill grain. P & H grain is coming into the elevator as well now, and it sounds like it was quite a good thing for them because P & H Elevator, apparently, is in a bad state of repair right now. So I think it was--. And we all got along really good.

It was a real good bunch of guys that got added to our crew. So I things are looking pretty good now because, like I say, we've got more options for grain coming in and going out too. Yeah.

NP: Any questions I should have asked you that you were thinking, "Oh, she's going to ask me this" and I didn't?

BW: I think you pretty well covered it. I was thinking it was going to be more of a pellet-plant focus, but it was pretty broad. So I think you covered pretty well all the bases.

NP: Now, we are hoping, as I mentioned before we started taping, we are hoping to have a grain industry centre of some sort set up. Wish for the best. [Laughs] Is that it? Prepare for the worst? So let's say from a pellet plant perspective—let's narrow it down to that—we wanted a sort of science focus because Thunder Bay doesn't really have a major science centre. It has a Science North satellite. But related to the science of grain, anything you think we could feature that might be of interest to people related to the pellet making operation?

BW: Well, I suppose a lot of people don't know what goes on as far as dust and so on. It certainly isn't put into the atmosphere, and nothing is wasted is really, I guess, the good thing. A lot of grain is cleaned out west now, so we're not getting as much by-products coming into the city. But everything is used, right down to the dust for feed. So it's pretty efficient, I would say. There's so much waste in the world today. It's nice to see that everything's getting used here. Something like an animal that someone might have killed 100 years ago where they didn't just kill it and take the pelt. They ate everything and used the antlers to make tools or weapons or something. Everything gets used, and it's good to know it's not a wasteful venture.

NP: People with asthma can now live in Thunder Bay.

[1:29:59]

BW: Yeah. Definitely. Maybe 30 years ago, they put all those collectors on the elevators so they could keep all that dust from going into that atmosphere. I guess the big thing these days is the GMOs. Countries don't want anything that's been modified in any way, so that can affect your markets. But maybe a lot of it has just got to do with education, people understanding. I guess cows came from deer. At one time would people not eat beef or something back then if--? "Oh, jeez, you've modified the deer. Now it's a cow." I don't know. I just think it's all part of the change, and we have a huge world to feed, and we certainly can't feed everybody wild game. There's just not enough available out there to support, and some people eat wild game, and most people eat beef or whatever. And wheat, I mean, that's grain. Certainly, it's feeding a huge part of the globe.

NP: Does Cargill—Superior—do they ship much in the way of peas, lentils?

BW: We have shipped lentils, not this past year. A little bit of peas, but not very much pulse grains I guess they call them. Pulses. But we have had crimson lentils and a few peas, but not a big one. We used to have a lot of flax. I used to work on the flax system for years, but we haven't handled flax now in probably four or five years. Not very much. The only oilseeds, I guess, we're handling now is canola, which at one time I just thought was a new name for rapeseed, but I guess it's changed from rapeseed. That's why the new name.

NP: Okay. Well, I've come to the end of my questions, and I'd like to thank you very much. I enjoyed your story. I enjoyed learning about the pellet plant. After so many interviews, I have things to learn. So thank you very much.

BW: Okay, thank you.

End of interview.