

**Narrator:** Ron Williamson (RW)

**Company Affiliations:** United Grain Growers (UGG), Seafarers' International Union (SIU)

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**Interviewer:** Nancy Perozzo (NP)

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**Summary:** Retired grain handler for United Grain Growers Ronald Williamson discusses his long and varied career in Thunder Bay's grain industry. He begins by sharing memories of some major Current River elevator events, like the demolition of Pool 9, the explosions at Pool 4A and B, and the collapse of UGG A's silos. He describes his first job in the elevators as a sampler, reporting to some memorable inspectors and superintendents. He then discusses his move to the tunnels, the intricate operations for boat loading, and some spill issues that could occur if the operation didn't run smoothly. He shares some other jobs he performed, like operating the dryers and unloading boxcars with dumpers or shovels. During the reconstruction of UGG A, Williamson discusses his brief change of career onto Great Lakes grain ships. He describes the common trade routes for ships, how commodities were loaded and unloaded, and his work as both a deckhand and engine fireman. Throughout the interview, Williamson shares many stories of the elevator's social life, its strong Gaelic culture, and the working conditions. Other topics discussed include sweeping boxcars as kids for chicken feed, using grain car doors in the wider community, the abrasive nature of grain on metal equipment, taking Prairie tourists on elevator tours, health and safety improvements, and finding non-grain items in grain shipments.

**Keywords:** United Grain Growers (UGG); Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; UGG Elevator A; Grain handlers; Grain elevator demolition; Pool 9 demolition; Grain elevator explosions; Grain elevator disasters; Pool 4A explosion; Pool 4B explosion; UGG A collapse; Grain sampling; Grain storage; Grain elevators—Equipment and supplies; Grain drying; Grain transportation—ships; Seafarers' International Union (SIU); Great Lakes trade; Railcar unloading; Boxcar dumpers; Boxcars; Hopper cars; Grain car doors; Mohawk Global; Bulk carriers; Lakers; The *Lemoyne*; Grain ship loading; Deck hands; Health & safety; Dust control

Time, Speaker, Narrative
NP: It is November 15, 2010, and we are interviewing a gentleman who has had a long career in the grain trade. So I will just ask him to introduce himself and tell us a bit about how he got started in the grain industry.

RW: Well, my name is Ronald Williamson, and I worked for United Grain Growers [UGG] for 40 years. And how I got started was I needed a job, went there, and I knew few of the bosses at that time, and I got hired.

NP: So approximately how old were you at the time you started?

RW: Go back 40 years, 20 something.

NP: 19?

RW: It was about 1957.

NP: 1957. My math is not that swift. [Laughs]

RW: Neither is mine.

NP: So did you--. We are currently in Current River. You grew up in Current River then?

RW: Right. Grew up in Current River. A couple of the big bosses here, one main one was inspector Mr. Tarnowski but he's dead. He died pretty young. He had one of the brain things in his head. He was 47. He was one of the guys that got me in because he was an inspector at Grain Growers at that time.

NP: So he was inspector for Grain Growers or for the government?

RW: For Grain Growers.

NP: And do you remember how to spell that name?

RW: Tarnowski?

NP: Mmhmm.

RW: T-E-R-N-O-W-S-K-I [sic]. Something like that.

NP: Okay, great. Great. So how old were you did you say?

RW: I don't know. I was 27, something like that.

NP: If you grew up in this neighbourhood, were you familiar with the elevators as you were growing up?

RW: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You see them always because I just lived over here too, eh, when I was a kid. I used to live a block away from here.

NP: On what street was that?

RW: Grenville Avenue.

NP: Would the kids from the neighbourhood go down to that area and--?

RW: Oh, yeah. Well, in the old days and during the war years, everybody up here had chickens, and they'd go down and sweep out the boxcars to get the grain to feed their chickens during the war years because in the boxcars there was always a little grain on the floor leftover. They'd bring brooms down and sweep it out. They'd get maybe two or three bags a day from all the elevators, and they fed their chickens and all up here. Everybody up here in the old days had chickens.

NP: So when the kids went down--.

RW: We swept the cars too, yeah, when we were kids.

NP: Yeah?

RW: The thing was lugging it back up the big hill. You made sure you only had certain kinds of pails because you've got to bring it up that hill, climb the big hill everyday. But now you can't do that because now it's all tankers. Now they open and close them, and there's no more grain left in them when you take them out of the tankers.

NP: And there's not many people raising chickens anymore either.

RW: No, nobody up here has chickens anymore, no.

NP: So it all worked out. [Laughs]

RW: It worked out. But see, we had a lot of guys come from the war, from Italy and that, and we'd try to tell them, "We never starved here because we had these elevators, and up here, any vacant lots up here, you just dug a garden, and nobody said nothing. The city didn't say nothing. The government didn't say nothing. You dug your garden, and you planted your potatoes and whatever, and you watered it and weeded it and brought it home. Plus, with a bit of stuff you got from the elevator to feed your chickens, you always had something to eat." You had a lot of stews in those days, but we didn't starve up here.

NP: One of the side lights of having the elevators close by.

RW: Yeah, yeah. Because you have them there too, you know? Then during the war years, then you had the soldiers down here on the Casino grounds here. You know just down on Cumberland there? There used to be a great big building there called the Casino, and the soldiers used to eat in there. And after the war, that building was rented out from the city to D.C. Enterprises, and D.C. used to have great big meals in there, like, for any of the big clubs. If there were about 4 or 500 people, he would feed them there. Plus, he would cook meals here at the Casino and take them over to the Colosseum when he had people there that have dinners there. They made the meals here in the Casino and delivered them over in half-tonne trucks in those great big heaters for over there. You got your salad first, then you got your meal, and the trucks were running back with the dirty ones—back and forth, you know? It was quite a system they used to have.

NP: When you think back to those early days before you started in the grain industry, but while you were growing up here, I'm familiar with the elevators that are there now. How do they look, the same or different from when you were a kid?

RW: Well, some of them they added on. Richardson's added on, and Grain Growers added on one piece, and of course, Pool 9 is not there no more. But if you go down and look where Pool 9 used to be, and if you have a picture of Pool 9, and you look at the picture and look at what's there now, 90 percent of the elevator is laying there on the ground. 90 percent. Most people don't know. If you see the picture of the elevator, 90 percent of it is right there on the ground.

**[0:05:09]**

NP: So the foundation then is still in place?

RW: No, no. They pounded it through. It went right--. They pounded the basement in, and the rest of it went in on top of it, and they spread it out. Three guys came there and did that job. One guy had a crane with the big ball, another guy had the bucket machine, and the other guy was driving a bulldozer.

NP: When would that have happened approximately?

RW: Oh. I don't know when they knocked it down. Back in the '70s, I guess, they knocked it down.

NP: And where is Pool 9? In between--?

RW: Grain Growers and Pool 4.

NP: Okay.

RW: In between there. Right now, there's kind of a--. Grain Growers has a pellet plant there on part of that property now. But see, what happened is they had a big wooden trestle there too for the boxcars. When they knocked that out of there, that's when most of the elevator now is laying where that trestle used to be. The rest of it, they sort of just spread it out. The only thing they took out of there was the machines. All the metal was gone. They took all of that away, and the rest of it is laying right there.

NP: So the rubble is still there instead of having been shipped away?

RW: Yeah. All the concrete is right there. 90 percent of the elevator is laying right there. Most people--. You have to see how they did it. Then the crane guy had to swing the ball from the Pool 4 side in so the rocks couldn't fall into the slip because they had boats coming there. So they had to keep hitting it from the Pool 4 side to make it come towards Grain Growers' side.

NP: How long would it have taken to dismantle the thing?

RW: Three months. Three months it took them, roughly. A big black guy from Georgia or wherever he's from, he ran the crane. He was telling us one time they used to knock down big houses in Chicago, knock out whole neighbourhoods. And one night, he was on a night shift, and he says, "Where are we starting?" "Start at the corner one and work your way back." And most of the time, he tells you how he does it. He drops the ball and just pulls it fast and half the house comes down. This time when he dropped the ball, he was lighting a cigarette, and when he looked up, the lights went on. They didn't buy that house yet. Nobody got hurt, but he dropped the big ball right inside. They had to buy--. [Laughs]

NP: I guess so.

RW: He was telling us, he said, “Oh, my face when that light went on in that house--.”

NP: I imagine.

RW: Well, he figures they’re all supposed to be empty.

NP: So if you’re a life-long resident of Current River, how old were you when there was the first explosion at Pool 4?

RW: Oh, that was about ’52, eh?

NP: No, there was one in ’45.

RW: Oh, ’45. I would have been 12 years old. I remember that one because we had all come to the top of the hill to see all the excitement down there.

NP: What do you remember about that?

RW: Oh, just the firetrucks and all that going down there. People were running around, especially people that their families worked there from up here. The women were hollering, screaming. They didn’t know if their husbands got hurt or not. If you look at Pool 4 on this end, you’ll see the concrete roof on the big workhouse. But if you look on the other end, it’s a tin roof. That’s the roof that blew up.

NP: Ah. And went straight up in the air from what I understand.

RW: It just kind of went up and came back down again. So they had to clear it all off, and they built the tin one after that. Then the blew out the--. Because, you see, they had no fire escapes at that time when that elevator blew up. That’s why so many people got hurt because they couldn’t get out of it, couldn’t get down. They couldn’t get downstairs fast enough. And again, it was in the morning. That morning it was kind of a warm morning, and they had the heat, a little wind, and some little spark. It went *boom!*

After it was all done, they had a guy come with--. At the fair grounds when the circus used to come to town, he was in there, and he had a big booth, and he had this big cylinder. It was about this big. He opened it up, and in there was a spark plug. So he locks it now, and on the top he had a piece of cardboard like this. He put it over the top with a clamp. He said, "What we need now is a little air." He had a little thing for air. *Pssht!* Blow that little dial. First of all, he puts some dust in there, and he pushed that little button to blow the air around. He said, "Now, we need a spark." He blew a big hole in the cardboard.

NP: To illustrate what happened?

RW: He said, "That's what happened." Yeah, just to give them an idea. *Boom!*

NP: Were you at school at the time?

RW: Yeah. Yeah, I guess so, yeah. But after a while, we all came to the top of the hill to look at it. And later on, when I see, I go down to take a better look down around the tracks to have another look at it.

NP: Did you know any of the families that were affected?

RW: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Quite a few of them were from up here. I knew them. But most of them--. [...*audio skips*] The building right next to Pool 9, and just one big--. The hole where the grain goes in to load the boat, just that one big hole blew out on the fellow on the boat. And the same boat was there for both blasts. The boat was called the *Bayton*, owned by Misener Steamship. I always thought for a joke if somebody on April Fools Day, to put the order on the desk the day before saying, "Refuse screenings on the *Bayton* to be loaded." How many guys would show up the next day if they read the order form? [Laughs]

**[0:10:19]**

NP: A bad luck ship.

RW: Yeah. Well, it was kind of, you know? For him to come twice and that same thing happen to him that the elevator blow up.

NP: And when did that--? That second one was in '52. What time of day was that one?

RW: That was what saved everybody because it was closer to noon hour. It was say after 11:30. In there between 11:30 and 12:00. Most of the guys by this time come down to eat their lunch. They're heading for the lunchroom, and they were just more or less out

of the way. Besides, it was only in the building here. It wasn't in the big buildings--. [...*audio skips*] The big cylinders. So it wasn't that really bad. How many people got hurt? I can't remember, but just the big fellow on the boat, that's all.

NP: Seven killed in that one.

RW: Seven killed in the second one?

NP: Mmhmm.

RW: That's what saved a lot of them because I think it was closer to dinner time.

NP: Mmhmm. And where were you at that time?

RW: I was at Grain Growers. We heard the boom. First of all, we didn't know what the heck it was, eh? Then once we realized what it was, all we had to do was--. You see the picture there of Grain Growers here. Where is it? This one here, right here. So we were in here, eh? All we did was come down to here, like these two openings here, and cross our tracks and go take a look. Go through Pool 9. You could walk over to Pool 9 here, and then you could see the big hole that it made.

NP: So you were pointing to the two gaps between the storage silos and the workhouse.

RW: Yeah. But then we just came out from there and crossed over. Pool 9's right here. Over to Pool 9 and just to--.

NP: Did you feel the explosion?

RW: Oh, yeah. You felt a little thing. Like, even when this Grain Growers fell--. [...*audio skips*] One piece, then the middle piece, then the end piece. When ships would come in to dock, and if you're up in the annex upstairs, you'd be sitting there, and you knew the boat was at the dock because when he hit the building, the building would move a little bit. You knew he was there, you know. A few times I told the guys, "The boat's at the dock." They said, "There's no boat there because I just looked out the window." I said, "Go take a look." They looked. "How did you know?" Because I could feel. You know how I knew? You could feel the building. It shook a little bit when he hits it, when he bumps the docks. He moves a little wee bit.

NP: It would be quite a bump because those buildings aren't tiny little structures.



RW: No, no. but you knew he was there because it would shake a little bit. You'd feel it.

NP: So did you say you were there at the time that the part of the elevator fell over?

RW: I was working there, but there was only two guys in the building when it fell over at 8:00 at night, roughly. It was a watchman and a guy named Pepler, Bill Pepler. Bill Pepler was upstairs, and the watchman was downstairs. He had to use the phone.

[...*audio skips*] Out of the window. He would have been dead. But he just had to make this phone call because some relatives were coming. So he went back, came downstairs, and he was on the phone. He didn't even know it went, it had fallen. It hardly made any noise at all! They just slipped into the harbour. And Bill Pepler was looking out the window because he was having lunch, and you know, well, "What's going on?" He was looking down almost at the water.

What was happening was when the belts pulled, the annex belts pulled, it was pulled in the big workhouse part with it until they snapped. They have these little clickers where they joined the belts. Once they broke, then the building came back again and just that part went in the lake.

NP: So the silos went in the lake?

RW: Just the silos went.

NP: And the workhouse righted itself?

RW: Yeah, it came back again, yeah. Pepler was there, and he, being how he is, he went and shut everything down, the power off to all the machines and that, and then he came downstairs down the fire escape, down the stairwell we had. The watchmen in the bottom, he didn't event know. He told him he said, "We've got a--." [...*audio skips*] Went and took a look, and it was gone. It was just laying in the water.

NP: So did it fall towards the--?

RW: Shipyards.

NP: Towards the shipyards.

RW: It just sort of slid in. And all it did when it went in, it just pushed the water. A big wave like a tidal wave. Just everything over there just got buried in water over there. It did a lot of damage. It filled up the drydock, knocked a building out of there. There was another building there too where they made wooden minesweepers. I don't know if you remember those. Just after the war, they made these wooden--. Out of wood and aluminum, minesweepers or something or whatever they called them. I don't know what they were for, for the old country. Pushed a great big hole in the building. Moved that building too.

And then down here at the end of the river, we had Abitibi. Knocked all the logs. They had a big thing there for fixing the rafts, the boom logs for fixing the rafts. Knocked some of the big logs right through ta half-tonne truck there. They did a bit of damage to them.

**[0:15:05]**

NP: What year was that, do you recall?

RW: '58.

NP: And you said you'd started at--?

RW: In '57, yeah. Which is kind of lucky for me. A lot of damage. Money wise, it was \$1 million in damage, but the insurance company, they got their money back because they covered it up right away with the stuff, that paper stuff so it doesn't get wet, and then up on the top, because the tracks were still there, they pushed boxcars in there, and they had those little screw things to pick up grain.

NP: The augers?

RW: Augers. They got a lot of it. But really, they were interested in the flax at that time. They got a lot of their flax back. The loss wasn't that big once they started taking it back.

NP: I don't know if you know the answer to this, but if I'm imagining that the silos are just moved over--.

RW: Just--.

NP: Were they on their side?

RW: Yeah. Like this, yeah.

NP: And so when they went to salvage the grain--.

RW: Okay, it would be like this right?

NP: Yeah. At about a--.

RW: This would be the silos. Then you just knock the concrete out and stick your thing in there and just see what you can get. They got a lot back. They did a lot. Then they took the silos to the scrapyard, out to the dump somewhere. I don't really know. All this concrete and cranes, and they just hauled it away with trucks.

NP: So how did they--?

RW: Well, it fell in '58, and they were loading boats in '61, May of '61. So '58, '59, '60, '61. Not even three years, roughly.

NP: And how did they demolish the silos?

RW: With a bucket, with a ball. Break it up with a ball and cranes. The top part was pretty good because a lot of it was on the top. When they went down to the bottom, they had to sort of just guess where it was, but they got it all out.

NP: And so, the elevator was shut down for that time period?

RW: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, because you couldn't get a boat in there because it was blocking things. [Laughs]

NP: Right. Yeah. Ian, do you have any other questions about the incidents before I move onto--?

ID: No. Move along.

NP: Okay.

RW: What incidents?

NP: The incidents of like the two explosions and the silos. So let's go back to where we started this, which is when you first started. Now, you said you started when you were about 27.

RW: Something like that, yeah.

NP: Yeah. Was this your first big job to be working in an elevator?

RW: Oh, yeah. The first big one. I worked at the shipyards for a while. I worked on the *Sir James Dunn*. I watched a few launches when they made the boats in the old days there. I was on a couple there. Then I worked in the mill for a little while down here at the mill, and I didn't like that. Then Mr. Tarnowski, I was talking to him. He says, "Oh, they're going to hire for the summer months. Come on down." I went down, I got hired, and that was it.

NP: What was your first job when you started with the elevator?

RW: I was a sampler. The sampler is when they dump the boxcar, you have a machine that picks up a small amount of grain, and there's two buckets. One the government guy gets, and one the elevator gets. You take it up and show the inspector, and he inspects the one for you, and the--. [...*audio skips*] Just looking at it. He puts it in a little can about this long—about like this, or like that, like this—a little can, and he writes some--.

NP: About eight by four by four?

RW: Yeah. Just a little thing. And he writes the number of the car, and he puts it on the shelf. Writes the data on it, and he puts it on the shelf, and they keep it for about three months, and they have a whole bunch of shelves. As they go along, they empty the old ones out and just put the new ones as they go along.

If there's any question about—farmers—any question about the car, and he figured he had a better grade than what was said, they take the can, and they put it down, and three guys come and three different times. One guy looks at it, shakes it up, and does what he does, then he writes what he thinks it is. The second guy comes, mixes it up again, he does his. Then the third guy comes, and whatever the two out of the three say, that's what it is.

NP: Did you--.

RW: You don't get that happening too often.

NP: No, I wouldn't think so. Yeah. When you say the three guys come, were they all come from the Grain Commission then to--?

RW: I don't know where they come--. But Willy Tarnowski, he had such good eyes. It was unbelievable how good his eyes were. He'd put down a car, and when they were--. [...*audio skips*] And we'd go there, and we're looking at it. "What bugs?" He had this pencil, and he said, "Look. There's one. Another one here." We still didn't, you know? He says, "Hold it." We have like a flashlight with a magnifying glass on it. Then he put it on there. He says, "See? There's one, one, one, one." Then we said, "Well, it was on the ticket." He showed us the ticket, nothing on the ticket. Then he had to go next-door to tell the government guys that there's bugs in that car. They didn't even see it. But his eyes were so good.

He could be back pretty far, and he could read the blackboard, you know? He could tell you what was written on the blackboard, and the circle's only about this big, and he's pretty far back. Usually, you've got to walk right up to the board to see it, eh? [Laughs] Somebody says, "Well, he memorizes it." I said, "Well, that's a lot of memorizing of all the boards." [Laughs] He had great eyes. And the government guys that come, they really appreciated him because he could see all this stuff with his eyes. He was really good at it. The company appreciated him too because he was really good.

**[0:20:37]**

Actually, he made big money for the company. Like, whatever--. If it was, say, a [No.] 3, he--. [...*audio skips*] This is better than a [No.] 3, and he knows this. It's in between the [No.] 2 and the [No.] 3, so he'll give it the [No.] 2, gives the farmer a bit more money in the deal. Will Tarnowski, he made them millions when he was the inspector, then he got to be a super after a while.

NP: Who was the superintendent there when you first started?

RW: Oh. One of the McKays. I think his name was George McKay. That would be Stan McKay's uncle, but Stan's father was the first superintendent. Then came George McKay, and then after a while came--. Stan was super for a while, then it was Dan Smith, another old Scotchman. Dan Smith. He was one of those sergeant majors from the war. Very nice man. But every time you talked to him, you had to say, "Yes, Mr. Smith" and "No, Mr. Smith." We kind of respected him, you know, because he was such a nice man.

Anybody that we wanted to get hired on, we'd tell him what to do. "When he comes out of the garage, he'll stand there. Just remember to say 'Mr. Smith.' And every time you say--." [...*audio skips*] I told them, "You just do that." And they'd do that, and

they'd follow him up to the office, and he'd be standing there, and we'd come in sometime. And he says, "Nothing's happening." And we said, "Did you say anything?" "No." "Stick around." Finally, he'd come back, and he'd say, "You're still here? Well, I guess we better hire you." So he'd get the staff. But he was kind of a funny man too. We'd tell the guys, "Don't go until he tells you." He'd come back and he'd hire you.

NP: So don't go until you're dismissed?

RW: That's right. [Laughs] But he was a good man, though. He was a very good man. If he gives you heck, two minutes later you say, "How's the family?" He was one of the best you ever--. And people who never met him new how good he really was. We had the government guys like Wilf Longey, and they had St. Patrick's Day for the Scotchmen, Burns Day or whatever it is?

NP: Robbie Burns Day.

RW: Yeah. They would fix him this tie, tie it in a Windsor knot, and he'd go hit him in the face with it, bring it up--. [...*audio skips*] Wherever he was going. They'd always sing to him. When they'd come in, they'd sing Scottish songs to him when Burns Day would come along. He said, "I'm glad it's only once a year." [Laughing]

NP: Was this the elevator where a lot of people spoke Gaelic at one time?

RW: Oh, when I started, we all talked Gaelic. Oh, yeah. They were all Gaelic guys there. The first guy that wasn't a Scotchman out of the class was Mike Jerimiah. He was a Ukrainian. He was the first one, and he came from school. They were hiring, so they hired him. His friends would say, "Mike, we heard you got a job?" He says, "Yeah." They say, "Where?" And he'd say, "Grain Growers." And they all laughed at him. "How are you going to work down there with all the--?" They all laughed, but they didn't really know that they hired him, and he was the first one that wasn't Scottish or Gaelic. He was one of the first ones that didn't come from the old country.

We had a couple of pictures. I don't know if you know in the old days, the people came on the train, and they had tickets on them. [...*audio skips*] And we had a few like that, and this one guy that looked like one of our bosses, eh? And they had a big picture up there. They says, "See that? He came as freight!" [Laughing] But it wasn't him in the picture, but the guy looked like him more or less. So all the Scotchmen came over as freight, eh?

And there was something else they used to do. They used to go to Ogilvie's Elevator and buy oatmeal, buy great big bags of oatmeal. They would ship them from Ogilvie's Elevator to Scotland cheaper than they could buy that in Scotland. Now, that's hard

to believe. Shipping five or six bags of oatmeal from here to Scotland, and they'd get it, and even with the freight, it was cheaper than they could buy it in Scotland. Les Green used to have a name for the Scotchmen. He'd call them Oatmeal Savages. [Laughing]

NP: And who was Les Green?

RW: Well, he was one of our inspectors too. He worked on the scale floor. He was like a big comedian, you know comedians. We had a Ukrainian guy there, and when he ate and cooked stuff, he used a lot of garlic, eh? If something went wrong, he'd go on the radio and say, "Garlic Snapper, get up here! I want to talk to you." Because he used to eat lots of garlic. He called him a Garlic Snapper. "Get up here! I want to see you." Whatever was wrong. He wanted to talk to him.

**[0:25:13]**

NP: Did the fact that most of the hiring was Scottish people, did that create difficulties?

RW: No, no.

NP: And when the hiring opened up a bit, was that a deliberate opening up of it?

RW: More or less, I think. I don't know why. They just switched over when they needed people to come in, like for the summer months, eh? You see, in the summer months, a lot of young kids used to come in from school. They hired a lot of school kids. The guys that worked with us, and their school kids coming in so they have money so they can go to university. Even McKay used to come, Murdoch, and his father was a superintendent. He had a lot of money--. [...*audio skips*] Be a lawyer. A couple of guys were pilots after. A couple of guys were chemical engineers.

They were always on what we called the manure gang because they cleaned up everywhere because on the roof you had all this muck you had on the roof, and you had to clean it up every year. So they pretty much cleaned the elevator up. The old super one time, the bosses from Winnipeg came down. He said, "You know, on my manure gang here, I've got more brains in my manure gang than you have in your whole office up there." But sure, because some guys became chemical engineers, a couple guys became dentists, pilots. He said, "I've got more brains on my gang here than you've got in your whole office up there." [Laughs] Which was true!

NP: Yeah. No, the elevators provided a lot of summer employment for--.

RW: Grain Growers was really good for that. Grain Growers was really good for that, yeah. There's a guy here in town here, he's a chiropractor. I forget what his name is, and he was really at one of our super's there, and he's a chiropractor now. A couple of guys are doctors. A judge here, Sisko, I think his name was, his son worked with us, and he's a doctor. So we had a variety of kids that came through the elevator that went on. They needed that money for school, eh?

NP: And the pay was good.

RW: Oh, for there? Oh, yeah. They got good pay for the time they were--. Plus, you worked the Saturdays for time and a half, and if you get in on the Sundays, oh, you get double time. So they were doing all right. Plus, they weren't paying no taxes because they got their money back because they were in school.

NP: Because they were making a lot of money for a short period of time, so their annual income wasn't--.

RW: That's right.

NP: Mmhmm.

RW: So they did all right. A lot of kids did all right.

NP: So if we go back to your career then, you started out sampling. And then what happened? How long did you do that and where did you move to from there?

RW: Couple of years, and then they switched this into a--. They had a system that if you were on the downstairs, you stayed downstairs. If they got you to go upstairs, then you stayed upstairs. Like, if they took you up to the scale floor, they more or less kept you up on the scale floor and some machines under there that they kept you there. If that wasn't busy, you were down there, or else they put you out into the annex where all the grain goes into the holes.

I happened to be in the basement where I took the grain out of the holes. But then in the winter months, I had to go up in the annex to put the grain in the holes because everybody was bucking and changing because of the seniority. I always went upstairs, but they wanted me to stay downstairs on the machines down there. I said, "No, because if I'm down here, you're going to want me to go down in the basement and help this other guy because he doesn't know. If he doesn't know why, you see there. So I go upstairs so they won't bother me to come downstairs." By the time I shut everything off to come downstairs every time wants me to, they didn't want that, so I'd stay up.



Because we'd try to tell them, "Leave the guy that's down there alone. He knows what he's doing. If the other guy comes, then he's going to have big spills or something. That's the company's fault because the guy doesn't know the job. He's just there because he's got the seniority, but he doesn't know what to do." So I always went up. Let him handle it. Let him figure it out. A lot of times they had big messes, you know, and they still didn't listen because of this seniority stuff. Then after a while, they switched it. They give you what they called a position job. You got a position, and you stayed in that position. They couldn't bump you out of your position, even if you had more seniority, they still couldn't get you off your position job.

NP: So before that was it seniority that would move people into positions even though they weren't trained for that position?

RW: That's right, because when they laid off in the fall time, everybody wants an easier job, trying to figure out where he could go. Whatever's left over, that poor guy on the bottom, that's where he'd end up. They'd want him to come over there, but if there's a little difference in pay, all he has to say is, "Are you going to pay me?" They say, "No," then he doesn't have to go because that's a higher job, a higher rate. So he doesn't have to go and show them.

NP: Doesn't have to move, then?

RW: Doesn't even have to show you because it's a higher rate.

NP: I'm not quite sure what you mean by show.

RW: Well, to show the guy--. Say the guy doesn't know something.

NP: Oh, you don't have to train the other person.

**[0:30:01]**

RW: No, because it's a higher rate, and you've got a lower rate. You don't have to go unless they pay you that rate. I ran into that a few times. It was like 10 cents. There was a difference here of 10 cents, and especially the guy who pulls the boxcars, he gets 10 cents more. They said, "Well, only one guy gets the 10 cents because he's the foreman." I says, "Well, I'm pulling the cars. What's the foreman doing?" He says, "Nothing." "Who's pulling the cars in? I am. How come I'm not getting the same pay he is? He's doing the same thing I am." "But he's the foreman." I said, "You've got two annex men up there. Does one guy get more than the other?" And they said, "No." I said, "You got two tunnel men down here. Does one guy get more than the other?" And they said,

“No.” “They do the same jobs?” “Yeah.” “I do the same job. I should get 10 cents.” They wouldn’t give it to me. I said, “Get somebody else.” This went on for a long time. They used to get mad at me for that. I said, “It’s only 10 cents! Why are you getting mad? Just pay the 10 cents and then everybody’s going to be happy here.” Then they had to get somebody else.

A few times a couple things happened, even when Murdoch was there. They put this other guy on the job, and he started pulling the cars. He didn’t go and check the brakes on the cars, and all the brakes were on. Put the cable on, snapped a brand-new cable. I says, “Boy, my 10 cents must look pretty good now, eh?” Because they had to get another cable, shut down, pull off that old one, get a brand-new one, fix it all up. I said, “How much was the cost for that? I only wanted 10 cents!” Murdoch used to look at me sometimes. [Laughs] I said, “I would have checked the brakes first.”

NP: So you worked under how many superintendents would you say?

RW: Oh, lots of them. Okay, the last one--. Who was there the last time I was there? Curtola. You know the singer? His brother, Curtola. Before him it was Willy Tarnowski, Stan McKay, George McKay, Dan Smith. Oh, a couple more in there. There was a couple more other guys in there. Antoniak. Robert Antoniak. He was another one. He was the super there.

NP: How would you describe differences in management style? Were they all pretty much the same or--?

RW: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They more or--. They knew you knew the job. They knew what you’re supposed to--. They all knew. They know what you’re supposed to do. They just left you alone. Like, when bins filled up, they knew that you knew that you had to fill this up at a certain time. Before a boat came, you had to do a lot of things before a boat came. You knew the boat was coming, so you had to fill these machines up and take the bins out, so make sure he had lots of room while we were loading a boat.

And especially in Grain Growers, one thing didn’t interfere with another thing. They could dump cars, load boats, and nothing interfered with one another. When you were cleaning it, not one thing interfered with the other one more or less, eh?

NP: So you could do things together? You wouldn’t have to stop one operation to start another?

RW: Sometimes there’d be a little hold-up maybe if you were running up through the belts into the annex because we only had six belts. You had seven cleaners and three receivers. If something had to go somewhere, something might have to get held up a little bit until one guy is finished with one, you know?

NP: So I don't--. I may have forgotten, but once you left the sampling, you finished sampling after about a couple of years, and then where did you go?

RW: I went in the tunnels, in the basement.

NP: Into the tunnels. So what happens in the tunnels?

RW: When the boat comes, they give you an order, and you go down, and you open the bins up, and the grain goes up to the scales. When the bin goes empty, you tell them it's empty. You open another one. They have a system how you--. All the bins on the outside can be taken up by one belt, okay? Like, okay, you've got three belts in the basement. Certain bins can only be done by this belt and this belt, and this other belt here--.

NP: In the middle.

RW: He can do either side. So if you've got an inside bin, say a bin here, that this belt here can also get it, so you open up one side here and the other side for this guy. Instead of having two bins on, you just zip this one out fast because you've got the two belts taking it out at the same time. So it's coming down pretty fast.

NP: What can go wrong there?

RW: Oh. Scale plugs up. It doesn't drop it fast enough, plugs up everything, grain goes all over the place, stops everything, jams it all up. For all the years that they had the elevators, and they have these jam ups, the horn blows--. They have a horn that blows. He has to tell you to shut it off right away because he's got no room for it. It's just running around now in the leg. You get shut off quick because he has little running room for you to clear that belt. But if it plugs up, then you had to go down in the basement and pull out this kind of a big slide. It has a big hole there, and you had to go in that little hole and shovel all that up onto the floor. You had to take all that grain from the top, all that grain that's in the leg, you had to shovel it all out onto the floor. This went on for a long time.

**[0:35:07]**

So finally we got one boss, Stan McKay, and we said, "Stan, why don't we put a little hole right here on the leg, right here? Put one of the little slides here, one on each side." You'd just open them, put a little board here, and that grain would just run out. Just run. Wouldn't have to shovel it. "Good idea," he says. Got the guy to cut the little holes, you open the little slides, and the grain just

runs out. That whole thing from the top floor, all that grain comes down and just runs out, and all you've got to do is sort of push it around a little bit until it stops. Then this little part on the bottom, that slide, that come out, then you only had about this much to shovel out. It would only take you about four minutes.

NP: So the grain that came out--.

RW: It just ran on the floor.

NP: Ran on the floor.

RW: Then they picked it up later, yeah.

NP: Okay.

RW: It didn't take long to pick it up after, but it was--. You had to get the thing empty so you could continue going again.

NP: What would cause a scale to clog up?

RW: Well, whatever they were doing, they couldn't--. He fills up the scale, then he shuts it off, and it goes into a garner. You've got two of them—you've got a scale and a garner. They both hold the same amount of grain. So when the grain comes up, it goes through the garner into the scale. Now, if the scale fills up, he can shut it off. Now he can fill up the garner. When the garner fills up, a horn blows, and he tells you to shut off because he has enough time to clear all the belts. Then he has to wait for something, whatever's wrong, then he can start dropping. Dropping it fast.

In the old days when they had the old boats here in the old days, they had this lever that when they opened the scale out, it would run out into the shipping bin to go onto the boat, that they could do this so fast, put the draft out so quick, that they used to put the cleaners on. Say you have two cleaners on the downstairs that were doing wheat at the same time, they would be on that scale also. You would be running from the basement, and then cleaners also would be coming up going into there. [Phone rings]

**[Audio pauses]**

So you also had those going into the scale. The guy at the scales, he still had to wait because it wasn't coming up fast enough. Everything was going because when he opened that lever, he put it right to the floor. That grain would go out faster than he could bring it in.

NP: And that changed?

[...*audio skips*]

RW: Come off, and he would have to run out to the annex again because they put those outside the elevators. You've got all the pipes way out there on those--. Like out here on here, they've got all the--. Out here they've got a bunch of pipes out here now on the water side.

NP: The sort of legs for--?

RW: Yeah, well, they're not shipping--.

NP: Chutes?

RW: Yeah, like chutes. Yeah. There are like shipping bins in, and when the grain went from here, it ran along the belt out to here, and it went down here into the boat. But they could move the things on the top here. They could move these things up here, and the boat didn't have to move. The boat just stayed there. Up here, they would move the thing up in here. They would move that, and they'd catch the next hold. At Grain Growers, if a boat was six holds, we only had four legs, but you could load four holds at one time with four different grades, like flax, wheats, whatever. He could load four at the same time.

NP: So you on the belt floor at the bottom, then, you would be--.

RW: Whichever one they want.

NP: Responsible--.

[...*audio skips*]

RW: Because another guy takes care--. There's two guys at each end. Each guy has one, and they tell you which one they want you to run on.

NP: What was it like working in the basement all the time?

RW: It was good. It was good because you had to sweep up too. If any grain--. Sometimes the grain spills out onto the floor. You had to sort of sweep it up, throw it back on the belts. It was a good job. You're not really at work. You stand around watching machines go, you know? You make sure everything runs right. You keep watch of this and watching that. Then in the fall time when it snowed and sometimes the snow would blow in the windows, then you had to shovel it all off the belt. [Phone rings] She got it already.

NP: Okay. [Laughs] So when it was snowing--?

RW: The snow would come inside. You'd have to move the belts just a little bit and just push the snow off onto the floor because it gets caught in the pulleys, and the belt will slip. It'll slip in the pulleys. Then you have to take it all, shovel all the snow off the belts. Like even when it's really cold, say, 20 or 30 below--. [...*audio skips*] You grab the belt, and he says, "Now," and he hits the motor in, and you sort of pull it. Everybody starts to pull it. It'll just crawl. *Er, er, er*. Then it doesn't take--. Once it starts to crawl, it will eventually start to go because it's slipping on the pulley, but then you have a spray stuff, like a--.

NP: Silicon?

RW: Silicone or something they spray on that tail head pulley, and then once it starts to grab, then you let them warm up for 10, 15, 20 minutes, let them just run like that, warm up. Then after that, away you go again.

**[0:40:02]**

NP: So who taught you the work down in the basement?

RW: The other guy who was there.

NP: Who was there at that time? Do you remember his name?

RW: Yeah. Stan--. Ah. Peter Silinski. He was the guy. And Jack Huskey was in the other end. He taught the guys in the other end. Well, after a while, you get--. It's the same thing in both ends, it's just you're opposite ends. The original first buildings were exactly the same anyway, so it was the same idea, just different numbers, that's all. The numbers just changed, that's all.

NP: Was there ever a situation where the wrong stuff went into the--.

[...*audio skips*]

RW: Where is this? I'll give you an idea if that happened then. It depends how much went in. It depends how much went in here. Where is it? I'm trying to see which one it is. There it is here. This is Richardsons. See this thing right here?

NP: Yes.

RW: That's a leg.

NP: Yes.

RW: The boat pulls up right here. And say you dropped in five boxcars too much, you could bring the boat over here, and this leg here would suck it out.

NP: Oh, so it--.

RW: Yeah, as long as you got a thing there, the leg goes.

NP: Like a vacuum.

RW: No. It's a leg. A big piece of metal, right? Inside that piece of metal was a belt, and on that belt, you've got buckets, little buckets. The thing there would stick it into that hole, and that buckets would start to go around and take it back.

NP: Was this the same--. So these were different than the chutes that were delivering the grain?

RW: Yeah. Richardson's had the only one here in town that could take it out.

NP: So you had to send the ship over?

RW: To take it out, yeah. [...*audio skips*] Money.

NP: No, no. I mean, at your place if you had to--. [Laughs]

RW: Well, yeah. But it happens, though. You know, it happens. Guys push the wrong button at the wrong moment, eh? The grain goes in the wrong place. It happens.

NP: So how long did you stay on that job in the--?

RW: Always.

NP: Always?

RW: I always ended up in the--. I always was left in the basement. But then again, I was a dryer guy too. In the wintertime, we learned how to run the dryer.

NP: So tell us a bit about running a dryer.

RW: Well, grain comes in wet. They have the moisture content, eh? So they know how much moisture is in the thing from the sample. They have a thing to test the samples so they know how much moisture is in it. They know how much moisture is in the grain, in the sample routine. Now, they run it up into the dryer, and they'll say there's so much moisture. So they'll set the dryer at, say, 110. So you set it at 110, and then it's in there cooking at 110. Hot air is just blowing in at it at 110. Let's say for two--.  
[...*audio skips*]

It's moving, and it's two hours, so you put a little line. So when it gets real close to the line, you'll bring the sample up. So you take a kind of average sample, all the little holes they have. You bring it in, and they look at it, and they'll say, "Leave it for another 20 minutes." So you leave it for the next 20 minutes, and then you take it out of there. They would say 20 minutes, and then you ran it up for them, you know? We had two dryers. So we could dry two different kinds of grain at the same time. We could do two of them at the same time.

NP: Sounds a little bit like baking.



RW: Yeah. Well, yeah. But then you knew the dryer was running because you look outside, and there's nothing but steam coming out of there. Just a big cloud of steam coming. That's from the heat. Where this big fire thing is, you start the fire thing up, and just in there they say is 100-200 degrees in there, and you're on this side of it. You'll freeze. You'll freeze where you're standing, and yet you're just on the opposite side because it's--. [...*audio skips*] And the other side is warm just a few feet away, and yet, where you are you'll freeze. It's warm on the other side there.

NP: During the time that you were working, was that--? How were those dryers--?

RW: Steam. They had steam in the old days before I got there. They were steam dryers. They had a big furnace, and they threw the coal in the furnace like you do for your house, and the hot air from the--. Like heating your house, that's how they did it in the old days. But after a while, they had the big blowers from oil. Big oil blowers. Like you have an oil stove blowing the hot air in. But in the old days, they had to heat up a boiler, and the boiler would throw in the hot air just like you do for your house. The hot air would--. Grain Growers used to have their old pipes down in the basement. If you look, you'll see all the old pipes they had there for the--. Grain Growers even had a washer. They used to wash grain at one time.

**[0:45:02]**

NP: How does that work?

RW: Don't know. But I have--. [...*audio skips*] Knew about it. He told us how it worked, you know? They'd put the grain in there, and they'd wash it with water somehow, and then they would take it from the washer into the dryer and dry it again.

NP: So what--.

RW: I don't know why they would wash it. I can never understand--.

NP: Chemical residue maybe?

RW: Could be. Could've been that, yeah. Why they would wash it in the old days, but they had a washer. Tito was the only guy who knew how the whole building worked.

NP: Is that his first name or his last name?

RW: That was his nickname. His name was Graham, but he was one of those old Scotchmen. We always called him Tito. He knew everything about the whole building. Everything. We had the old wiring system in there. When you push a button to start up everything, you push a button and the motor starts, eh? Not in the old days there. You had this lever. You'd push the top so it would get out of the lock, then you had to push it one way, and just *Err*, and then you pulled full blast, and it would run. You had like a little kicker starter, then you had to pull it the other way.

So they got rid of those because they figured it would spark. [...*audio skips*] You keep going *Er, er*, then *Er*, then get it going. You didn't have to have guys to pull it because it was just one thing you would have. This way you could sort of jerk it. I always thought they were great, you know? If it wasn't for the dust, it would be perfect. If you had somewhere where it was really cold, this was a great gadget for that. Give it a little kick start and then--.

NP: Because it wouldn't freeze up. It would--.

RW: That's right, it wouldn't freeze. So then you could get it going again fast. You could only give it so much power, and then you could stop it. So much power and stop it. Then when you had it running, to keep it going they just pulled it the other way quick and it ran. It ran full blast.

NP: Sort of sounds like our chainsaw and the choke. [Laughing]

RW: Yeah, yeah. Same idea for it. A lot of things in the old system was really good. It's unbelievable how it worked, and it was good. Grain Growers had the dumpers right from day one. They had dumpers. You know how elevators shovelled the grain? You know how they shovelled the grain? You know that about the cable? Two guys, one guy goes on this end of the car, and he starts to come out, then this guy--. [...*audio skips*] You know how that works, eh?

ID: Mmhmm.

RW: Okay. We never had those. We had one of those, but we only used it for these partitioned cars. A partitioned boxcar is that they put the grain doors in. Before the grain doors go in, they put sacks full of grain right behind one of the doors. Sacks full of grain. Then they put the grain doors in. Now, where the sacks are, they shoot the grain over the sacks to fill up that end of the car. Now you've got like two grades—say, flax in sacks, and they shoot wheat over the top. Then they turn the spout on this one and put, say, oats in this end. So when you open the doors, you've got to take the oats out first. You take the doors out then take the oats

out. Then you had to take the sacks out. Once you emptied all the sacks and piled them out, then you took the wheat out. We used to get maybe--. We had a little siding track there where we'd get maybe four cars there. The guys that were--. [...*audio skips*]

You know. But it took you all day to do it because once you got into the hopper, you had to wait for the dumper to stop, and then you had to run your hopper. Then the dumper would go again, then you had to take your sacks out. Then once you did that, they'd stop the dumper again and then put the sacked stuff up. Then you had to shovel this out. In the meantime, the dumper kept going, and then they stopped the dumper, and then they ran that out. Then you had a bunch of cleanup, and you'd run that car out, then you brought up the next one. You were there all day. You did two in the morning, two in the afternoon. So you had two guys--.

NP: Very labour intensive that one.

RW: Yeah. But you had two nasty guys. If the bosses were nasty, "Get over there."

NP: Your punishment for--. "Treat me nicer next time."

RW: That's right. [Laughing] If they listened, you don't have to go there. Yeah. And then the wooden doors in the old days, if you had the shovel houses, you had to cut the doors with an axe because the grain is behind there. So how are you going to get them doors? So you had to cut a hole, eh? Then over the years, the bottom door, they put a big piece of cardboard, make a window, big window that you just had to cut the cardboard with a knife, then all the grain from behind--. [...*audio skips*]

They didn't have to worry about that because of the dumper. The dumper had big arms there that would hit the door on the bottom. The big spikes would go into the door. The other guy would push the doors in. Once he started to push them in, the grain would run out of the hole, and where he was sitting, he could see over the top how far down it is, and he lifted it up a little bit more. Then more would run out. As soon as he couldn't see it anymore, he just lifted it right to the ceiling. Now, the doors are now stuck up in the ceiling between the ceiling and his machine, and that's where the doors are.

**[0:50:02]**

Over here on this thing, he's got a big arm here. He puts that into the car. Now he lifts the car up into the air this way, and all the grain in here hits this arm and goes down into the hopper. After a while, he gets it up there no more, he brings it down, takes this arm out, and over here he's got another arm that goes in this way. Up comes this end, and all the grain there goes out. Brings it back down, and he puts this one and goes up. Then when he puts this one in, car's empty.

NP: So those are the dumper cars then?

RW: Yeah. That's how we dumped them, yeah.

NP: Was--. [...*audio skips*]

RW: C.D. Howe. Howe built the whole thing. C. D. Howe built the whole elevator. Yeah. Then when you're done, when you take the arms out, the doors stayed in the car. They never came out. They just stayed right in there. Then they head down--. The railway had what they called doormen that had to take all those doors out, take the nails out. Any broken ones, they had to take them out and repaired them with other boards. And every so often, they had all these boards piled up outside just down the end of the elevator. Then the railway would put a boxcar there and send about ten guys there to put all them doors into those cars to send them all back out west again.

NP: Although, I understand a number of doors found their ways other places?

RW: Oh, yes. Yes. Chicken coops and whatever. Oh, yes.

NP: Back to those chickens!

RW: Back to those chickens and whatever. Little dog houses or whatever, yeah. We had a man up the street here at the corner house, from the corner there to this great kind of a big apartment house sort of here. There's three other houses there now, but there was nothing there. This one guy had all of that plus another lot. [...*audio skips*] Come home at the midnight shift at the elevators, looked to see if you could find the CP [Canadian Pacific] small doors, and he took them apart.

In the fall time, he levels off his big garden there, and he put up this board about this high all the way around. We had the biggest rink when we were kids right down at the end of the street here. Peter Pawlowski. I don't know if you know who he is, but he was a great hockey player here. He wasn't very big, but he was fast. Where did he live? Right across the street. He skated all year on that rink. That old guy had a great big screen in front of his big window. He would sit there drinking beer and watched us play hockey, even had one light in the very middle hanging from one end so we could play at night. Every year, he took them doors down and put them back up again for us, then he flooded it, swept it off for us. All the kids were there playing hockey.

NP: Lucky kids!

RW: Yeah. We were all lucky. Then we used to go down to the end of the street here onto the lake here because it's a dead end right here on the lake. Cleaned that off and--. Because it almost froze right to the bottom right here in that bay. It was solid. The kids could play hockey on there. They always played hockey there. But now they empty Boulevard Lake out all the time. I don't know why, but they do it. Look at the dam. They've got all the sluices open, so there's hardly any water in there anymore in the wintertime. You can't skate there. Even one time they even brought the Zamboni out here for us to skate on. You know in the middle out there? You don't know that? The city used to bring a Zamboni and clear a big area off there, and people used to go skating. Then they stopped that. City always stops something.

NP: Having too much fun, you were!

RW: Not really.

NP: There's probably a reason why they have to clear the lake out. We'll have to check that out.

RW: Check that one out.

NP: Questions people have, "Why did you do that?"

RW: We used to have kids and people would ski on the golf course here, and they said, "oh, you're wrecking the greens." They stopped that. Every time the people go to enjoy themselves, the city comes up and stops you from doing it. I don't know why, but that's our city.

NP: I'm going to--.

RW: We used to ride skidoos over there. You can't ride skidoos anymore.

NP: No, I can imagine. That would horrify them. Over the years that you were doing the jobs, since you spent so much time in one area, what changes did you see in the technology of the area that you were working in? Or did it stay pretty much--?

RW: It stays the same, except the grain wears out metal fast. It'll leave--. That thick metal will be eaten out within a year.

NP: About an inch thick will be eaten out--?

RW: About like this. There'll be a big hole in there. So a few times when the engineers come, they happened to be there, we'd show them. "Oh, jeez, look at that! A big hole in there." They'd say, "How long does that take?" We'd tell them, "You know, a year, a year and a half." And they'd look at us. So one day, we called them over almost a year and a half. I said, "Don't you read the cornflakes where it says its got iron?" He says, "Yeah." I says, "That's it." [Laughing]

NP: You were doing your bit for fortifying the cereal! [Laughing]

RW: We were doing our bit.

NP: So did they change the--.

RW: Of all the grains that are in the elevators, which one do you think wears the metal out the fastest? Would it be the wheat, the oats, the durum, flax? Which one do you figure? Barley?

**[0:55:12]**

NP: I would just guess wheat.

RW: You'd be wrong. It's the flax.

NP: Is it? And it's so smooth that I would have thought--.

RW: That's right. Everybody says that. "It's so smooth." But it will wear the metal out so fast. Anywhere you go in the elevator, if you see these--. We call them gumballs, the black tar stuff. A piece of paper, you pick it up with a piece of paper, and you stick in on that little hole, and after a while when it's not busy, they'll fix it. They'll put a liner in there or something. Anywhere you see a lot of them things, that's where the flax runs. It's the flax that's wearing that out.

NP: And they never found anything that worked better than the metal?

RW: Now they've got these little things that they put in that will give you--. Say you had to change it every two years. Now you don't have to change it until maybe four years because they've got a whole bunch of other stuff they stick in there, some kind of plastics and stuff now. They've tried everything, boy. Anything that came out, they'd give us some to try. "Try this, try that." But it will wear out, but it gives you an extra year, year and a half before you have to take the metal out. Grain wears out metal like crazy.

NP: I've got that impression. We had a--.

RW: Well, you know the big spouts that you have for loading?

NP: Mmhmm.

RW: Okay. The grain runs on one spot. It runs so long, then they'll turn it over. Then it has to run on the other side. So you get two things on the big spouts. You get like a top and a bottom. It'll never hit the sides because you can't do that because that's where the wheels and that are, but you've got two sides. If you get a hole, then they can turn it over so it'll run on the other side.

NP: So would you also be responsible for that maintenance, then, or is somebody else? The millwright would do that or--?

RW: Oh, no. Yeah, the millwrights. But then in the fall time, this is when they do everything is in the winter. That's when they help--. This is when all the helpers come in. They help the millwrights do all--. You do all the taking down, putting up the lever. Taking it from the shop to the job, taking it from there to the shop, and they do all the work, the fixing it, and you've got to lug it out, lift it up, and they do all the hookups. You help them, but you guys are doing all the labour more or less for them.

NP: You mentioned earlier on that at the time that you started working, there was a period when the silos slipped into the slip, and so that you went to the ships for two, three years?

RW: Yes. Two. About two.

NP: So tell us about that experience.

RW: Well, I worked on old buckets. Now you see the boats, they've got all these modern hatches, eh? They've got a crane that lifts the hatch up. I was not fortunate. I worked on the ones that had the canvas. Some of them had like metal slides, eh, that they slid open the metal slides open. Then they have a canvas that goes on top. But the ones I was on had the wooden things. You had to put the wooden--.

NP: Hold covers?

RW: Covers on. Then you had to put the canvas on. Then you had to put these bars around the canvas with wedges to hold it on there. That's the kind I had.

NP: So were you actually out on the ships, or were you working on the ships to load the grain?

RW: Oh, no, no. On the boat. Where it goes, you went with it.

NP: Okay.

RW: You had to go with it. But then I got smart, and I got to be a fireman, throw the coal in the furnace. That was a little easier.

NP: So how did you get the job on the ship?

RW: They had a thing on Simpson Street, the Seamen's Union. They used to be on Simpson Street. You go there, and they put your name in. Then you had to get a whole bunch of stuff done. You had to go see the government, and they'd take your picture, and you had to get a book, and they'd take your fingerprints and all this. The union got one, you got one, the FBI got one, and the Mounties got one.

NP: Your security clearance.

RW: Yeah. Security clearance so that when you went into the States, your book was up in the wheelhouse, and they'd call you up, and they'd look at your book. *Boom, boom, boom*. "Sign here." They look at your picture and sign. If it matched your sign, you're that guy.

NP: Did you hire onto various shipping lines, or did you work for one particular one?

RW: I worked three. I worked Canada Steamship, Mohawk, and I forget that other company. Mohawk was the best one though.

NP: What made it the best?

RW: They had good cooks and that on the Mohawk line. [Laughing]

NP: Let's get right down to the important things!



RW: That's right! They had good cooks. The cook on the Mohawk boat was really good.

NP: Who owned the Mohawk line?

RW: I forget the navigation company that had the Mohawk line.

NP: Out of the States?

RW: No, no. Out of here. Because they had the big boats after. They had the *Shaughnessy*, and they had the two that Richardson's bought. I forget what the names of them were, but they had great big ones built in Ireland or something that Richardson's bought. It was only small boats at the start, but they bought big ones after. That Captain Irvin from town here, he was on the *Shaughnessy*, then they moved him over onto the two big ones that they had bought. He was only a little guy, but he could, oh, handle those big ships, boy. Small little guy.

**[1:00:40]**

NP: So describe your first trip on a ship then.

RW: Well, let's see. You know how you see ships out here in the bay? You know you can see two of them coming from way out there, around the corner? You know when you see how big they are? Now, say, in November like when I was coming up when the what-do-you-call-it sank?

NP: *Edmund Fitzgerald*?

RW: *Fitzgerald* sank. Okay. Say that you're here and about half a mile away is another one, and you're both the same size. Great big boats, eh? Would you believe you don't see that boat for two minutes? You don't even see his spar for two minutes because you're going up and down, and there's water in between you. "Oh, there he is." And down you go again. You can't explain it to people. You have to be there. That's all you can say, you know? You can talk about it--. You're watching the news reels, and you see the ship go *whew*, and then it comes up? This--.

NP: Disappears in the trough of the wave?

RW: The front goes down into the wave, and all of a sudden, it comes back up. That's what happened to the *Fitzgerald*. The thing was it went down, and it come up. And it went down, up, and down. But this particular time, the *Fitzgerlad*, when it went down the wave there, it came up, but as he was coming up, the next wave came, so he was still in that trough thing. He didn't get up again. Then come the big wave. He did never come up. He just went right to the bottom. Now everybody says this and that. Even now they're saying it was a big tidal wave or whatever they call them, fluke waves. They've got a name for them.

NP: The rogue waves.

RW: Rogue waves. That's what got it finally. But they said, "Why didn't they get out of the wheelhouse?" The doors in the wheelhouse open outward. How can you open the door with the water? It's like being in a car in the water. You can't open the door until the inside of the car fills up with water up to about here, then the door will open. Equal pressure. That's what happened. They didn't get out. Now, if they did open the door, they couldn't get out anyway because the water was coming in. You couldn't have got out anyway. Didn't matter which way it worked.

NP: So when you went on your first voyage on the ship, was it a grain ship?

RW: Yeah. It was the--.

NP: And where did you fill, do you remember? And where did you go to?

RW: Well, we filled up here in town, in Thunder Bay, and we went to--. That was a good boat, that one, too. That was the *Lemoyne*. The old, old *Lemoyne*. They made another one after that, but this is the old one. It was a slow, old bucket. It only went about eight miles an hour. Top speed, eight miles. We would go to Kingston and unload in Kingston. Then we'd go to a place for iron ore, and we'd bring it to Cleveland. Then we came back here. Then we'd make the same run again, but this time, we wouldn't go to Pickton. We'd go somewhere else for coal, and we brought it to Ashtabula, take the coal off there, and then come here. That was one of the steady runs. That's all they did. It was either iron ore or the coal.

Then you have an idea of how they take the coal on and take the coal off, and they have a crane that when they're taking coal off, the bucket goes right in the hold, but the driver is right with the bucket. He's sitting on top of the bucket. It's a solid arm. When he goes down into the hold, he grabs, but after a while when he goes down, he can turn and grab this way also, but he has to come back up this way to come up to the hatch. As soon as he comes up like this, he just drops it. There's a bit hopper that he just drops it. They have three of them.

Okay. The first guy takes the, let's say, the last hatch, and the other guy takes out--. No. Okay. He takes out the last hatch, and this guy takes out the third hatch. The guy in the middle, he does whichever hold he's doing. He does the same so that when they move, he'll move to the second hatch. He will move over one, and he will move over to the next hatch. When you're done, they're all--. Because they're big machines, so they all had to be out of each other's way when they get emptied.

NP: And also emptying it at the same rate so that you're not--.

RW: Yeah. More or less. Plus, they put bulldozers in the hold, little bulldozers to push the coal up towards the hatch so the guy can grab it, okay?

**[1:05:04]**

NP: Must have been a dirty job though, just the same.

RW: No. It was pretty easy. The crane's doing most of it. Nobody goes into the hold until the very end. Until the very end of the job, just to sweep it up.

NP: But this little bucket that's going in, it's enclosed then?

RW: Oh, the driver? Yeah, he's in like a little room when he goes down and grabs. He's in like a little room. But it was neat to watch them do that. I always wondered how they would do it. Now, when they take the grain out of a hold, it's on a system like we have to bring the grain from the bottom of the elevator to the top. It's the same thing like the arm that Richardson has. It's the same idea.

NP: The buckets?

RW: Yeah, the bucket. Okay. You've got a hold with three hatches. He'll do this hatch first. First hatch. Then he'll go over, and he'll do, say, the third hatch. Then he'll come back and do the middle one last because when he's doing the middle one last, they put these big aluminum things in the hold. Four of them go down into the hold, and on the wall, they've got these big rings that put the tackle block onto. So as you start going down, the guys keep moving the blocks for the cables. They got these big aluminum buckets, big plows, eh? That's what each guy--. Two guys run two of them. So I run the two from the corner, eh? *Zoom*. Push the grain to this--.

NP: Centre?

RW: Centre thing coming down, the leg.

NP: The buckets.

RW: To the leg, yeah. I pushed--. [...*audio skips*] You know? Same idea. And he does his. You're going out, he's coming in. He's going out, and you're coming in. It's like a dance.

NP: Like a dance. [Laughing]

RW: It's just like a dance. Square dance!

NP: Yeah. And if your timing is off, it can create difficulty.

RW: Oh, they're standing on the top of the deck watching. They run like a little box on the top of the thing. They sit there and they just run them back and forth. They can empty almost as fast as you can load. Almost as fast as you can load because they do three holds at a time, eh? They can almost empty as fast as you can put the grain in there. I was on the boat, and we went to, oh, where the Prime Minister French guy is from down there.

NP: Baie-Comeau?

RW: Baie-Comeau there. We were unloading the wheat at this elevator. The wheat was going into the elevator and out the other side onto a Russian boat. Not only that, but the boat that left, he put his load on, we came, and our load went on, and when we're leaving, another big boat came, and his load was also going on that Russian saltie. He was taking three--. [...*audio skips*] A boat on the other side.

NP: What years would have been the years you were working on the lakes then?

RW: It would have to be '58, '59, '60. It was interesting for me because being here, then I knew how the rest of the system worked, how the locks worked. A boat goes into a lock, right? Now, say you're at the top, high part of the lock. Now you put your cables on hand to the guy, and he puts them on. But say you're at the bottom of a lock coming up the other way. How do you get your cable from your boat to that guy on top?

NP: I should know because I went into the lock at the bottom, but I can't remember what they did.

RW: They throw a rope down, and you tie your cable, and up on the top he's got like a little kind of a winch. He hits it with his foot. [Laughs] It's like a wheel, and he has a little rope. He goes one turn around the wheel, and he puts his foot on the winch, and it just keeps bringing up the thing. Then when the cable comes up, right in front of it is the head that that cable has to go on, and it falls right on there automatically. Then when it's going to opposite way. He just reverses the system. He puts the other side--.  
[...*audio skips*] Hurt somebody. [Laughs]

NP: So it has to be controlled?

RW: Yeah.

NP: So those years, now, when did the Seaway open, was it right in then?

RW: No, not when I was there. No. The Seaway wasn't there yet.

NP: Wasn't open yet.

RW: '53, I think, they started building the Seaway or something. In the '50s, they started building that.

NP: Yeah, I can't recall when it opened.

ID: Yeah. '58.

NP: It opened in '58?

RW: No, I think it was after that, eh?

ID: Was it?

RW: Or it could be. When I sailed, the Seaway wasn't there.

NP: Hm.

RW: We were on the smaller boats, eh? The Seaway wasn't there yet because the smaller guys were going through yet.

NP: So you would go to Goderich and places like that?

RW: Goderich, yeah. Ashtabula, Ohio. Up here. You know, the big 1,000-footers they have here? They can only run on certain Great Lakes. They can't go into Lake Ontario. Can't go into Lake Ontario because they can't go through the locks. They're too big. They can only go through the lock at Sault Ste. Marie. They've got a 1,000-foot lock here, but they can't go down past Sarnia or whatever it is. Well, you can't go into Lake Ontario.

NP: Speaking of that, with the increased size of the boats--. [...*audio skips*] You job down--.

RW: No, no. Like see the little guys there? The little guys only carried about 100,000 bushels. These big guys carry millions. Same crew. So you can see the difference.

NP: So you'd be at your job a lot longer to row the boat?

**[1:10:01]**

RW: Oh, yeah. You know, they closed Pool 4 elevator here?

NP: Mmhmm.

RW: Okay. Grain Growers only have four scales. To put that million on it would take us four, eight, 12, maybe 12, 13, or 14 hours because we only had four scales, eh? Pool 4, a boat comes at 8:00 in the morning, and if it's one grade, he would be going out before 5:00. And they closed that elevator down. How stupid can that management be! They could put over a million bushels on in less than eight hours. Some dummy says, "Oh, that elevator's not fast enough," or whatever. Because they've got two buildings. They had two sets of scales. They had eight scales. They ran twice as fast as any of the--. Pool 4 only got the good grades, only good grain, and they just ran through that thing so fast.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: And explosions, they were doing the--.

RW: Yeah. Well, even before the explosion, they still had the same system for loading, but they loaded faster because the votes were smaller. 100,000-bushel boats, he'd be gone in about an hour. He'd just stop and go, you know? But the bigger ones, the bigger million-bushel ones, he'd start at 8:00, and around twenty to 5:00, he would be backing out already, full. Yeah.

NP: I think we're going to take just a little break. **[Audio pauses]** When we continue. Yeah.

RW: Sure.

ID: Thank you.

RW: The best part of being at--. Because I was a deckhand, well, you run around the boat painting. When the boat's on the run, you just paint. You paint all over. If it's raining, you paint inside.

ID: I imagine you do a lot of cleaning too if you change cargoes like--.

RW: Oh, yeah. They hose them down. They hose everything out. They had big hoses, eh? Here's something maybe you don't know about the bigger ship, you know the big ones that you have now, the 1,000-footer or the big ones. In the summertime when it gets real, real hot out, if you ever see any pictures of a boat going along and it's hot out, they're not cleaning. You know what they're doing? They're keeping the ship so it doesn't expand. They're putting cold water on the metal so the ship doesn't expand. Because as soon as they leave, they hose it down because there's always dust all over the place. It holds all that dust. But they're sailing out in the lake and getting--. On Superior, they're okay, but when you get down below there, the guys are hosing all over the place with hoses. That's so the ship doesn't expand too much to go through the lock. A lot of people don't know that. They don't think of why they're hosing it down all the time. It's so the--.

ID: Those ships you were in, were the coal-fired any of them?

RW: Oh, all of them were coal fired.

ID: Wow.

RW: I wasn't that lucky to get on the big ones. And those big ones, they have tunnels on the side that you walk from the front of the ship to the back under the hatches on each side. There's three doors—one at each end, and one in the middle—and you go through each door, and you close it. Then you walk. The ones I was on in the fall time--. Oh, here. This is going to be interesting for you. In the fall time, the big waves like you seen here the other day--. [...*audio skips*] From the front one to the back one, and on that cable, they had other little ropes hanging down. So many at the front, and so many at the back.

Now, if you were at the front, and you wanted to go back to eat, you'd look out, and you'd watch the waves, how they're hitting the deck and rolling over the deck. So now you've got to time it, right? Now you grab that rope, and you run over top of the hatches. But if you don't quite make it, you've got to climb up the rope until the waves break under your feet, then come back down, and run, and *psst!* And get to go where you're going. But you never let go of that rope because if a wave hits you, you might go overboard. So you keep holding that rope.

ID: Hatch covers you mentioned.

RW: Yeah, well, the hatches, you know, you've got to run over top of them, yeah.

ID: How much did they weigh?

RW: The metal ones here with the crane? 12 tonne, close, I guess, because they've got a big crane that lifts them, eh? About 12 tonne. Those are the smartest things of all, those hatches. They've got two guys—one each side—and they've got a--. [...*audio skips*] And he lifts the hatch up, and then he moves it over to where they gonna store it, so you can load. Then when they lower the thing down, you take it off, and you go to the next hatch. They pile the hatches up on top of each other. And to load them, they've got like a little wrench. Underneath, they just put the wrench and pull so that comes loose, and you take it down. Two guys go around the hatch in less than a minute, the big hatches.

ID: And that's now.

RW: Now, yeah.

ID: What was it like, the first hatch covers you ran into?

RW: Oh, they were the wooden ones. That's two guys with boards, putting the boards up. They--.



ID: You must have been in good shape.

RW: No. They're easy. The boards aren't heavy, but you've got two hooks, eh? Two little hooks. And the other guy's got two hooks, and you lift it up and put it in place, then you go and get the other one. When you take them off, you do that. You pile them. The last of them go off. Start in the middle, and then when you go back, you put the first guy here, then the second.

**[1:15:08]**

NP: It all sounds not too bad until you think about doing that at minus 20 degrees and raining. [Laughs]

RW: That's right. And--. [...*audio skips*] The steam, you know, to thaw them out a little bit. Then you had to try and keep that dry when you rolled it up so you could unroll it. So it would kind of be flat.

NP: The canvas?

RW: The canvas, yeah. It was one big canvas.

NP: That wouldn't have been too pleasant in the--.

RW: No. Canvases never were pleasant. When they bought that iron maiden, oh boy, everybody was just laughing. Then in the fall time, like underneath the lid there's a little rubber under there.

NP: Like a gasket?

RW: Yeah. Like a big rubber all the way around. But where you put it on the deck here, it's solid. So in the fall time, they put grease on here. They have a big can of grease. You go along with grease. Then you put the thing on that when you put those on, the rubber and the grease squished. Now no water can get in there no how. Can't get in there no how.

NP: And I imagine it also prevented the covers from freezing to the deck as well.

RW: Yeah, that would help too. Yeah, it stops them from freezing too. Plus, the crane would shake them up anyway when they were there.

NP: Plus, you said that you--.[...*audio skips*] Tell us about that job. That couldn't have been an easy job.

RW: The *Lemoyne*. I shoveled coal on the *Lemoyne*, that was the first one. The *Lemoyne*, you had three guys shovelling coal. They had four boilers. Why? I could never understand that, but they had four boilers. So each guy had--. There were four boilers, so we had about four, three, six fires each. You throw the coal into the fires. Then you had these great big, long metal things that you had to break in to break up--. The clinkers they called them. When the coal gets hot, it sort of melts together, and you put this big bars in, and you snap them to break them up.

The first thing when you learn to shovel coal, the guy explains it to you one time. "Because after that," he says, "I won't have to tell you again. You'll get the message." That when you put the shovel in the coal, the door is open, and you look in there, and you want to roughly guess where that coal's going to go. Get an idea of where you want to throw it. So when you throw it, you don't look. You throw it, and you stand back. You've got to stand back because when you're down there looking--no more eyelashes. He says, "I'll only have to tell you once. You get the message because if you don't, then the second time, then you really get the message."

NP: And I understand when you're shovelling coal it was a certain number of hours on, certain number of hours off.

RW: Four. Four on, four off. If you're on the 12:00 to 4:00, you go noon hour to 4:00, midnight to 4:00, noon hour to 4:00, midnight to 4:00.

NP: And then your time is your own?

RW: Yeah, the rest of the time. But where are you going to go? You're out in the middle of the lake.

NP: So what did they do with their time off?

RW: Oh, you slept, and you read, played cards, and whatever. We used to--. In the empty holds coming up empty, some of the holds got water in it to keep the boat down. They had to pump water to keep it down. Some holds were empty. And the one hold that you always know that the biggest one that's empty, you do that one last when you're cleaning up. You always do that one last because when the--. I don't know how long it takes you. They know you're down there doing that, that when you end up quick, we had a ball, and we used to play broomball in the hold because you went down a ladder, right? A couple times--. One time the mate came and he went, "I don't remember it taking so long." He looked down there. He came down. He says, "What's going on?" We said, "grab a broom." And he started playing too. [Laughing]

ID: So how did you sign on? Did you have to go to the Seamen's union hall?

RW: Yeah. Seamen's hall.

ID: And they would give you a--?

RW: All the papers to go to the police. You had to get photographs like our passport photo. You had to get so many of those and get your fingerprints for them, FBI and the Mounties. You had one and the union had one.

NP: How did you get assigned to different boats? You weren't assigned to a boat and where it went, you went?

RW: No. When a boat thing came on the board, if nobody wanted that job--. Say there was ten guys there and nobody wanted that job--. Because when you start, you're going to take the first one you can grab anyway. So once you got on the one, then after that, you get a little seniority, then you can take any one you want after whatever comes up on the board. They have a board of how many boats. That's why the Simpson Hotel and that when it was there made a lot of money because the sailors right across the street they just stayed in--.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: Just some—because we're coming up to the end of our tape—just some general questions. Did you ever think about the connection between you and the farmer that grew the wheat?

RW: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

NP: What are your thoughts on that?

RW: I've seen more grain than a farmer will ever see. Guaranteed. Farmer will never see a million bushels of grain at one time. I've seen a million bushels in the hold at one time. There's another thing I used to do in the elevator when tourists used to come. First thing I'd ask them, where are they from? If they are from the Prairies, I have a name for them: Flatland People. Okay. So when they come into the elevator, we have a big fire escape there, and at the very end, you go out on the fire escape, especially if there's a boat there, and they can see the boat being loaded, and they can see the shipyards.

[1:20:32]

Say there's four or five of the people, eh? They're from, say, Saskatchewan. When I get to the door, I'd walk out on the fire escape. Now, this fire escape's got holes in it. It's got the metal with all the holes, eh? And there's a railing. [...*audio skips*] Goes in there in the doorway. He doesn't know how to step out. I says, "Sir, are you going to come out, or are you going to stay in there? Because we've got people behind you." Out of the five, maybe one guy will come. The other people will look out the window, you know? So I talked to them about the boats, got to talking about how the spouts work and the shipyards are over--. And after that, I take them up on the roof there, and then they can take pictures all over because they're safe up there because of the huge--. So when I come back downstairs, the guys are looking. "One. Only one stepped out." [Laughing]

NP: So it was a contest! "How many of this group stepped out?"

RW: Yeah. The guys looked, and I said, "One." [Laughing] But don't forget, these people are not used to 110 feet in the air. You just walk out--.

NP: Now, you didn't think this was unkind.

RW: Who? Me? What? I'm a nice guy. I stepped out. [Laughing] That was kind of a little joke. I'd go out there. Poor tourists.

NP: Did the tourists usually enjoy the tour?

RW: Oh, yeah. Especially because they--. Like I'd ask them how big their farm elevator was, and they said like 15,000--. [...*audio skips*] They'd fill up this hole. That's just one hole. I said, "Oh, my God!" Like each hole that we had, the big ones, held 16 boxcars at that time. Now it's about 10 tankers because those tankers are bigger.

When they built Grain Growers, the man wanted to put in--. Let's see. He wanted to put in, I think it was 5,000-bushel scales. Oh, my God! That was way back in 1928. They thought he was nuts. They hemmed and hawed and gave him 3,000-bushel scales. If they would have listened to him at the five, they would have been right on the money. It would have took the whole tanker. The tanker would have went into the scale, the next tanker would have gone in the garner, everything would have been perfect. But now, they take up a half a tanker, he has to drop it, then bring up the second half after that. But if they would have went and listened to him at the start, right on the money.

NP: Who was that?

RW: Well, the guy who designed the elevator wanted to go 5,000, eh?

NP: So whoever worked for C. D. Howe because it was designed by C. D. Howe, was it?

RW: Yeah. But I guess the owners didn't want to have that big of a scale, eh? They only wanted the 3,000-bushel scales. You see, in the morning when they had the boxcars, the guys in the morning, they'd come up, and they'd say, "Come ahead for the boat." Or ever dumping the boxcars in the house. They'd dump the first car. It's coming into the scale. They blow the horn and tell them it's all up. He'd shut the scale, push the button, come ahead with the next one, and they'd all be having coffee. So when the second car came up, he'd push now, stop it, give you the light while you're still dumping it downstairs anyway into the hopper. Now he'd go out, and he'd weigh the first one off and drop that one. He'd weigh the second one off and drop that one.

Now this time, you're running that third one up, and he's still sitting there drinking coffee. You dumped three cars. They dump about five an hour. You're dumping three, and he hasn't moved in the shop. He's just laying there, and he pushed a button. It'll come into the garner. It comes ahead to the garner--. [...*audio skips*] He makes those two in a hurry, and then it's a game. He fills up two before he goes out again. He can time them.

NP: He can time it.

RW: Yeah. Because he's got the light. He knows the light. When the light comes, then he has to make a move.

NP: Yeah. As long as he's paying attention.

RW: That's right. Most of them--. Les Green, he could run on six belts in the annex different grains, different holes, and that's six different cleaners he's running downstairs, and he's got six belts running, say, upstairs, different grades. And there was something else. Oh, yeah. And six sets. He had to have the sets on the distributing floor, and he could sit there and play cards, and he knew where everything is, in his brain. He knew where everything was running. You ask him, and he'd tell you right away, "74's running now." Other guys, they had little pieces of paper, they had it on their hands, and all their writing. And Les Green had it all in his head.

NP: Smart man.

RW: Yeah. They used to play some kind of a card game called the Aces. What the heck was that game called? The aces were points, the 10s were points. They had a name for it. He could remember the cards, you know?

**[1:25:02]**

NP: He'd be a great bridge player.

RW: Oh, yeah. He was good at it. Boy, he was smart. Like he'd say at the end, "Put the five out," because you add up the cards on the table, and then you took them. Les was good at that game.

NP: Did you ever consider how what you did contributed to Canada's success as an internationally renowned grain trader? Did you ever see your part as being--?

RW: Let me put it this way, when the Liberals were in power, we moved a lot of grain. When the Conservatives were in power, what a mess we had then! They were the worst guys to have for grain. The Liberals--. In the old days, the Liberals filled up everything with grain, boxcars and everything. Did you ever see any boxcars on the sidings here? You know downtown there on the waterfront where you have your thing there? Remember all the tracks they took out? They were always filled with grain cars in the old days. Do you ever see it now? Nothing. They had big sidings down here, down the [inaudible] here, filled up with empty grain cars, full ones waiting to come in. You don't see that now.

Now they order. They order for the week how many you're supposed to have. Even all those big tankers. And in the fall time, they load up all the tankers with grain to keep them to have dry grain. The ships used to call and take storage loads. They would fill 1 million bushels in the holds and have it stored for the winter, keep it dry. Conservatives didn't care. I never vote Conservatives never. Never. They don't care about our country. If they cared about our country--. Remember the guy that broke up the airplanes? Diefenbaker.

ID: Dief--.

RW: Broke up your airplanes. I always wondered why. Why--.

NP: The Arrow.

RW: Yeah, the Arrow. Why would he do that? I thought, you know, they do stupid things them Conservatives, boy. I can never understand a government ruining something that is the peoples' stuff that the people own, like Hydro, the airplanes, and that. Why the government, one guy, can say, "Destroy it or sell it." I can never understand why the people--. They can get away with that. Especially if we have a Senate, maybe, that's supposed to stop them, but they don't seem to do nothing. I can never understand the politics and all that, giving it away or destroying it.

NP: Did you have a question, Ian? I sort of sensed--. [Laughs]

ID: You actually got into sort of more of the sort of social end of things—playing cards for instance. Was this part of life in the elevators?

RW: Sometimes.

ID: Some people have mentioned alcohol as being--.

RW: Well, that's way back in the old days.

ID: Yes .

RW: The guys drank a little bit sometimes, yeah. They drank a little bit sometimes.

NP: We've heard "They drank a little bit" to "They drank from dawn til dusk." So did that depend on the different elevators?

RW: Oh, not--. Yeah, different ones, yeah. Not in ours. They didn't do it that way. But, we used to have in the wintertime, we used to have big dinners. We'd make spaghetti or something, big dinners, especially if it's cold outside. Everybody had to pay a dollar and a half, two dollars to eat the spaghetti and that.

ID: So you had somebody designated as cook?

RW: Oh, yeah. We had a couple guys who were designated as cooks. We had big stoves, and they'd cook it up. And a couple times, the guys, they had wine with it. A bottle of wine, they'd have a glass of wine. One of our bosses, he came up, and they let him has his for free, you know? He said something about, "What would be good with this would be a glass of wine." Les Green says,

“White or red?” He says, “Well, red.” And I poured him a glass. He said, “Eat and get the hell out of here.” Boss ate, and he got out of there. Everybody was having a glass of wine and having a meal. It was okay.

NP: You’ve talked about the changes and some of the challenges of the work, but are there any you’d like to add? Any changes that occurred that made a big difference to your work life?

RW: Oh, when they brought all the safety stuff was pretty good that they put in. Like the helmets. Guys never used to wear helmets, eh? Which is good that they brought the helmets in because you’re always bumping your head and getting cuts. That was kind of a good idea they brought it. A lot of good safety glasses they brought in too. They got rid of the glass and brought the plastic stuff in, which was a lot better because the glass could break. The plastic was really good in the safety glasses. They did a lot of good things that came in. Well, everybody had to wear the safety boots. That was another kind of a good thing because you’ve got big metals you’re playing with, the millwrights and that, and it falls on your foot.

NP: And dust collection would have come in during your time?

**[1:30:00]**

RW: Oh, it was there before I came, but they improved on it now. They’ve got better fans and stuff now, yeah. A lot better. But they eat up a lot of electricity though, eh? Like when I was there, you start up a fan. You’re going to go do something, you start up a fan, and you went and did it. Then on the way out, you stopped that fan because why run it if you’re not going to be there no more, eh? Then you had to go way in the back, so you’d start up one fan, then you’d keep going to get to the second one. You start up that one, then you did your little thing, then on the way out, just stop the fans again. Now they start them up first thing in the morning, they run all day, and you’re not doing nothing down there. Why they went into that stupid idea I can never figure that one out, you know? That wasn’t even a smart idea the guys that came up with that.

NP: Using electricity all day long when you don’t need too?

RW: Yeah.

NP: And you can hear the fans up here because I--.



RW: Yeah, you can hear them run. This here, this trestle thing here, when you covered all that up with sand after a while, that's the way it was when I started, then they had to take all that out of there when the elevator fell over on both ends. They moved all that sand out of there, and now they built a big concrete trestle that we have there. We have concrete trestles there now.

NP: Yeah. Did you say that it could have been the pressure of the sand? I can't remember if you said that that--.

RW: That helped a little bit, but what made it fall over was they had no pilings. They had just wooden pilings, and the boats going back and forth sucked the sand out. That sucked so much sand out that she just slid in. Now they've got steel pilings, so the sand can't sneak out.

NP: When you think back on your career, which was a long one—and sounds like a successful one--.

RW: You know these little wooden, these little boats? We'd have three of them at our elevator at one time tied up waiting to load. Now you can only get one in there. We used to see three of them at one time. You'd never see that again.

NP: Yeah. No, for sure. What are you most proud of in your career when you think back on it?

RW: Well, I always thought that--. I used to ask this one old guy, "Have you given everybody in the world a loaf of bread?" "No," he says. "Not even come close." Then I said the same thing, not even close. At one time when we were there, we had a thing on the board. I don't know what year this was. Way back. I'll say around 1970. We were running into our 1 billion bushels going through that building. It was a special thing that they wrote up for us. 1 billion this week. We were going through 1 billion bushels of grain. Imagine what a pile like that looked like!

NP: So you did think about that this grain was going, eventually, to food to people around the world?

RW: Oh, yeah. Here and there. But you can have a whole meal of grain—the beer is barley, spaghetti is the wheat, and bread, cookies or bread. It's almost a meal, and it's all grain! Spaghetti. Only the sauce is different, the beer, and even to the margarine is grain from rapeseed. So you can almost have a whole meal that's all grain.

NP: Yeah. And you have your peas and beans too that would have--.

RW: Yeah, peas. You feed a lot of people with grain. Of course, it's a big product, but you still feed a lot of people down the road. And some grains you get alcohol and stuff out of, eh? Like some of them, seven different things, some of the grades. Different stuff

you can get out of all of them. Like, flax screenings, it's just the screenings, just these wee broken pieces of flax and all the dust, and they squish that up. We ship it like that, flax screenings, and they get the flax, and they get oils and whatever they're going to get out of it, eh? Like oil, I guess, for three-in-one oil. I don't know what they do in it, but it goes out and somebody makes money with it.

NP: Not a lot of waste. Over the years, they learned to--.

RW: Well, even here. The only thing we used to throw away here is the straw—burn the straw—and the rocks and the killed, dead mice and the metal. Like even the metals that come in, the old days they didn't do too much with it. It was ruining the machines. Guys came along and said, "Jeez, enough of this," and they put big magnets. As soon as you dump the cars, as soon as the car starts to come in, there's a big magnet there. *Choom, choom, choom!* They got more tools and nails, boy, than you could shake a stick at.

NP: Yeah? What was the most unusual find on the magnet?

RW: Oh, we'd find bars, hammers, and a lot of those socket wrenches, socket things. The farmers dropped them in the grain, and we get them here. We would tell them, "Don't throw it in, fellows, because it comes out here." [Laughing]

NP: Well, actually, there is a story—and it's supposedly a true one—that a fellow in the Prairies dropped his false teeth into his load of grain, and he said, "Don't worry about it. The people in Thunder Bay will"—at that time, probably Fort William or Port Arthur—"will find them." And sure enough, they did, and returned them. So.

**[1:35:19]**

RW: Another thing that crazy farmers used to do, they used to go for lunch, I guess, when they loaded the cars, especially the boxcars. When we would open the door, there would be the round thing they used to load the car. They took the bar out, and they didn't take the clamp off. The big clamp would be there. We'd save so many clamps. Then when Stan McKay was here, he would put them in a suitcase or whatever and take them back up to Winnipeg, and they'd send them back on the Prairies. I don't know what he did with them, but he'd send them back every once in a while. Like even the sacks that we used to get, we used to have so many sacks that then we'd send them. The truck would come, throw them on a truck, and they all went back out west again. They went back to the farmers, eh?

NP: What would come in sacks?

RW: The flax. They had the partitioned cars. You'd save a whole pile of--.

NP: Oh, and then you would--.

RW: Send the empty sacks.

NP: You would empty the sacks? Oh, okay.

RW: Yeah, and send them back out again after you got so many piles. They'd throw them in a truck, and away they went back out west went again.

NP: Any vivid memories, stories, that you haven't had the chance to tell that--?

RW: Nobody got killed at the elevator when I was there.

NP: Oh, good.

RW: Nobody got killed on our elevator. No. Nobody got hurt. You know, a few guys got hurt, but nobody ever got killed or anything.

NP: Good safety record, then.

RW: Good safety record. Everybody sort of watched each other, you know? Like we have horns and stuff. Say you're going to start a belt up, and you ain't too sure if there's anybody there. You give it a little click, one little *err*. It'll move a little bit, eh? Then you wait a little bit, *err*, and you do it again. *Err*. So if anybody's there, he sees the belt move, or he hears it go *clunk*. So after about the third time, he should be away from it then, and you can click it in, and away you can go.

ID: It sounds like you had a whole system of communication built on horns and lights.

RW: Yeah. Right--. [...*audio skips*] Once he tells you to come ahead, you come ahead, and then if he wants it shut off, he hits the button, and the light goes off in the basement. Big lights go off. *Rr, rr, rr*. Then you go and you push a button that stops the lights so he knows that you got the message to shut it off.

ID: Ah.

RW: Yeah. The lights and horns would go, and you just push a button to signal them back, "I got it." He shut it off, and he's happy.

NP: We're trying to preserve the history of the grain industry in Thunder Bay, and this project is a big part of that. If we manage to get some kind of centre established, what kinds of things do you think should be remembered, commemorated?

RW: Well, if you get enough of the old pictures, eh? I was going to do something for you, but when I phoned the guy, he didn't have them. His friend had them. So he went to get them from his friend, but his friend, whatever he did, he gave it to his sons or something. They had a deck of cards. He had a deck of--. [...*audio skips*] Blast. The whole deck of cards and all the pictures on the cards of the blast. Then when you sort of were going to come, I thought, "I'll phone Pepe and see about the cards." If he had the cards, I was going to photo stack them for you, but he never had them. It was his friend's cards. So when he phoned him, his friend, somehow his sons or something got it. He didn't know where they are now. But if I could have got them for you, I was going to photo stack them for you so you could have all the pictures.

NP: Oh. Like there was a deck of cards put together for--?

RW: Yeah, with all the pictures of the blast. They sold them as a thing here in town one time.

NP: Oh, really? Wow.

RW: So if you ever talk about it, ask anybody sometimes, "Do you know anything about the cards that they had?" You might run into a deck.

NP: Yeah. Wow.

RW: Because I've seen the deck. I've seen--.

NP: Well, if that fellow ever tracks his son down, you know, even if we could borrow them to make a photocopy of it--.

RW: That's what I was going to do. I thought Pepe owned them, eh? I was going to borrow them and take a photo stack, and then you guys could have had the pictures. But I'm sorry, but that's all the pictures I can give you.

NP: Wow. That would be special. Yeah, no, that's fine.

ID: That's great.

[...*audio skips*]

NP: That way?

RW: Yeah.

NP: the time went very quickly.

ID: I know.

NP: Yeah. Wonderful stories.

RW: I had good bosses. Grain Growers always had good, good bosses, eh? Like Murdoch McKay, his father. Murdoch ended up as the manager, and his father and his grandfather and uncle. All the old Scotsmen were all good bosses.

NP: Yeah. Are there other people that you can think of that maybe we should put on our list to interview?

RW: Oh, Murdoch should know because Murdoch had a good job because he ran across the country for Grain Growers. He was like a manager from here to--. I don't know how far he went, but it was pretty far. I guess all the way to Vancouver, probably, Murdoch went. He come down two or three times a year all the time. We all get on his back. Murdoch was--.

[1:40:05]

And the Scotsmen were good to fix something for you. If there was something wrong, they looked at it. They'd fix it. They got the millwrights right away to change it to make it go faster and smoother for everybody. Stan McKay was great for that. Stan was one of the better men for that. One time, I wanted Stan to change a slide, and he made a whole new spout--. [...*audio skips*] For the company, you know? Why would we play around here for two hours emptying this bin when we can do it in 10 or 15 minutes, you know?

NP: Sure. Should have kept the same thing with your 10 cents an hour! [Laughing]

RW: Yeah, my 10 cents an hour, yeah.

ID: It's true. Scots are renowned engineers.

RW: Yeah.

NP: Yeah.

RW: We had a few guys that wouldn't do the job because they wouldn't give them the extra 10 cents. They'd say, "Get somebody else." You get somebody else, now you're taking a chance. What if he doesn't know what's going on? Like they broke that cable, you know? That was a brand new cable that they had just put in.[inaudible] I says, "Murdoch, I would have took the air off the brakes first, Murdoch."

NP: Ah, a little bit of stubbornness! [Laughing]

RW: Yeah. But they've got to be--. They're the bosses, okay. I used to play a game in the elevator. We had these machines, okay? Peter Silinski, here, he was the main tunnel guy, so I always emptied the machines so he could loaf for a bit or go for a smoke or whatever. So I said, "We've got [No.] 1 feed screenings in there. What are we going to do next?" So he would say, "Put the broken durum in." So I'd write it down, "Broken durum." Then I'd start taking the bins out. I've got five bins to take out. Pretty soon, somebody will say, "What are you going to put in next?" "Well, that's feed screenings and pieces of broken durum." They said, "No, put mixed feed oats in." So I write, "Mixed feed oats, cross out pieces."

Then after a while, another boss come along. I said, "Well, we're going to put maybe mixed feed oats with that." He said, "No, no. We'll put those tailings in." "Okay, old tailings." Then by the time I got done, another guy would say, "Put the [No.] 1 feed screenings in." You know, the head boss said, "[No.] 1 feed screenings." So that's what I'd do. When I come down to Pete, I said, "Here's how it worked. You said this, thing said this, Tito said this, and Stan said that." And each time I did this. He said, "What the hell is going on?" I said, "I'll tell you what it is. I'm the boss. I'm the boss! I'm the boss!" [Laughing] A little game I played.

NP: And you'd do it each time?

RW: Every time. I'd wait until they asked me what they've got to put in. "Pete said this." Oh, no. They'd change it. The final big boss--.

NP: Add up how much that is in time. [Laughs]

RW: Not time, nothing, because I'm not doing nothing.

NP: Oh, you weren't doing it. [Laughs]

RW: I'm just waiting for them.

NP: Good thing you didn't do it every time they said it. Thank you.

RW: You're welcome.

NP: Great interview.

ID: Thank you.

**End of interview.**