

Narrator: Walter Zarowski (WZ)

Company Affiliations: Ogilvie Flour Mills, K. A. Powell Ltd.—Edible Oils, Canadian Grain Commission

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Summary: Retired industrial chemist Walter Zarowski discusses his long career in Thunder Bay’s grain trade in the scientific sector. He begins by discussing his childhood next to the grain trains on the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks, and he shares his father’s story of immigration to Canada from Ukraine. He describes his first job out of high school with Ogilvie Flour Mills’ new starch plant, where he performed quality control tests in the laboratory. He explains what the starch plant did, goes step by step through the process of separating starch and gluten, and shares gluten and starch’s uses. Zarowski then discusses his move to K. A. Powell’s Edible Oils plant on Mission Island, where mustard seed oil was made with byproducts from the surrounding grain elevators. Other topics discussed include seeing the Empire Elevator burn down, K. A. Powell’s change to making rapeseed/canola oil, photos of the Edible Oils lab in the Thunder Bay Museum, the closure of Edible Oils lab, and his move to the Canadian Grain Commission’s lab.

Keywords: Ogilvie Flour Mills Co.; K. A. Powell Ltd.; Canadian Grain Commission (CGC); Ogilvie Grain Elevator—Thunder Bay; Ogilvie starch plant; Grain science; Wheat starch; Wheat gluten; Vegetable oil processing; Grain byproducts; Mustard seed; Canola; Empire Elevator; Fort William Elevator F; Fort William Elevator E (Consolidated)

Time, Speaker, Narrative
<p>NP: The person I’m interviewing today, who I’ll ask to introduce himself, has a long career related to the grain industry. This interview is taking place on September 18 on Franklin Street in what used to be called Fort William. So if I can just have you introduce yourself and talk about where you grew up, and then we’ll move into your early remembrances of the grain trade and your actual experience in it.</p> <p>WZ: I was born and raised in the former Fort William and lived for my early years next to the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] tracks on West Gore Street.</p>

NP: And your name is--?

WZ: Pardon?

NP: And your name is--?

WZ: And my name is officially on my birth certificate Wladimir Zarowski, commonly known as Walter. When I was growing up in west Fort William, the CPR tracks ran back of our house. The net result is with the natural curiosity of a boy, I always wondered what was happening. Why did these trains go back and forth? Where did they come from? Where were they going? Our family, in our early years, always had a cow. We always had chickens. We always had pigs. So I had an early initiation with animals, and I got to love animals. Not always when I had to clean the manure, but generally speaking.

Skipping certain sections of the early childhood, I finished my high school at the Fort William Collegiate. I went to Crawford Avenue School originally, and then I spent five years at the Fort William Collegiate. When I finished the Collegiate, I thought to myself, "All right. Now what?" I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and how to go about it. Out of desperation, I spoke to the principal of the Fort William Collegiate, and he said to me, "By sheer chance, I had a call from Victor W. McClain this morning, and he said that, essentially, they're looking for a bright young man to work in their starch plant."

The Ogilvie Flour Mill Company was starting out a wheat starch plant as an adjunct to their terminal operation along the CPR tracks. They--. I'll throw this in. So he said to me, "How was your math and how was your chemistry?" Well, it just happens they were two of my favourite subjects. So while I was in his office, he phoned the manager, Victor W. McClain, of the starch plant and told him he had this so-called bright, young man that is interested in looking for work, and at the same time, thinks he'd like to work something related to grain because of the proximity of the railway tracks.

While I was there, he called Mr. McClain and told him that he was sending me over to talk to him. I had probably a 15- or 20-minute conversation with Mr. McClain, and it sounds--. He said, "It sounds like you're the man for the job." And then, he was holding a pen in his hand, and as he held this pen, he said, "They didn't tell me. And what did you say your name was?" And I said, "Walter Zarowski. My birth certificate said Wladimir." He stopped, he put his pen down, and essentially, he had already given me this job, but then he proceeded to try and take that job away from me because he couldn't pronounce my name.

[0:06:17]

To my thinking at that time, it was a blatant case of racial discrimination. I was stubborn enough even at that age where I thought, “You’re not getting away with this.” So I talked and talked and talked, and basically, I made a deal with him that he accepted that if he was not satisfied with my work, I would not hesitate to accept a release from any kind of understanding we had, and I certainly would not work for the man.

I started to work at the laboratory. It was a very basic laboratory, nothing fancy about it at all. But after I worked there for three years, I started off at \$75 a month. After three months, I went to \$85, and then gradually, I worked up toward \$115 a month. About this time, I was keeping company with my—not former wife—but prospective wife, [laughs] and so after I’d worked there at Ogilvie’s for three years, I decided I’ve got to make an effort to make more money.

About that time, the K. A. Powell Company was building a vegetable oil plant on what is now Mission Island, but at that time was called Island Number Two. I ended up having an interview with the people, and I was hired for the position. I ended up working for K. A. Powell for many years, because they owned Elevator E, F, and the Empire, and incidentally the Empire burnt down to the ground—it was a wooden operation.

When I decided that I have to get more money if I’m ever going to get married and raise a family, so I decided to take an interview with the Canadian Grain Commission [CGC]. I had an interview with the Canadian Grain Commission, and they were just starting quite an operation, and they decided to hire me. I ended up working for the Canadian Grain Commission for a total---. Well, I worked a total of 49 and a half years in the grain trade, and specifically just at the moment I can’t remember what the proportions of time was.

[0:10:15]

NP: Maybe we could go back to when you graduated from high school. How old were you when you graduated from high school?

WZ: About 16 and a half.

NP: So you were born in--?

WZ: I was born in 1927.

NP: Okay. And then how long did you stay there with the gentleman who wasn’t sure he wanted to hire you because of your name at the starch works? How long did you stay there?

WZ: I stayed there about three years because, at that time, I was starting considering getting married, and I could see that, financially, it was impossible to continue working there if I continued my career in that position.

NP: So when you moved to K. A. Powell, then, how long did you spend with them approximately? It just gives us a sort of general idea.

WZ: It seems to me it was roughly 20 years.

NP: Oh, okay.

WZ: Yeah. Roughly 20 years I worked for K. A. Powell.

NP: And do you recall the year you started with the Grain Commission, then?

WZ: It's not coming to me at the moment.

NP: That's okay. So how long after you were married? Or was it after you were married or before you were married? This helps us sort of--.

WZ: It was after I was married. Yeah.

NP: How many years did you put in at the Grain Commission?

WZ: Pardon?

NP: How many years did you put in at the Grain Commission?

WZ: I worked altogether for 49 and a half years in the grain trade, so if you subtract about 21--.

NP: From Powell, and another three. Okay. We can work that out. Anybody who's listening and wants to work it out, they can figure it out. [Laughs]

WZ: They can figure it out.

NP: Okay. Now, I'm going to take you right back to your early days along the railroad tracks. I've always found it fascinating since I've started this project talking to people who grew up near elevators or near the railways because they could talk about what was happening on the railways, how people who lived near the railways or had transportation to get to the railways were able to make use of excess grain that was around or uses they found for broken grain doors. Any stories of that type to add to the mix?

WZ: Down in my rec room where I first took you, I have a little yellow card about this big. My father came to Canada because my uncle had come to Canada first, and he talked about how wonderful the country was and *blah, blah, blah, blah, blah*. So my dad wanted to come to Canada. To show you how things have changed, I had there a little yellow card about that long and this wide that brought him to Canada all the way from western Ukraine to Fort William. It's hard to imagine how things have changed in that regard.

When we lived on West Gore Street, we had chickens, we had pigs, and we always had a cow. So I was tuned to the farm aspect, if you will, the grain aspect. Seeing boxcars going back and forth with grain in them, asking my mother and dad foolish questions. "What's in there? What's in there? What does it--?" And watching the birth of a calf on the one cow we had, whose name was Rosie. My mother's name was Rosie.

[0:15:11]

NP: So what did your father do when he came? Did your uncle come to Thunder Bay, like Fort William?

WZ: My uncle came to Thunder Bay, and my father had a very hard time because he had been in the Ukrainian-Polish Army. It's a mixture of Europe, of course. When he came to Canada, he was trying to establish himself, and he had a very hard time establishing himself because of the language barrier. It took a while before he found--. Somehow, he made contact with the Gascoigne family, and Russ Gascoigne had a drug store here in latter years, but in the early years that I'm speaking of, Mr. Gascoigne took a liking to my dad and gave him a job and helped him get established.

NP: And what did your dad do?

WZ: My dad became a machinist, actually, in the Canada Iron Foundries, and he worked there 21-22 years. Then because it had been his life's ambition to own a store, he asked me if I would help him establish it. And he bought a piece of property on East Brock Street, on Brock and Tarbutt. How he did it, I don't know. But he bought a property, and he was going to call his store

Steve's, but then he found out there was another store not very far away called Steve's, that's when he decided to change the name to Wally's, and Wally's was established and is still sitting on the corner of Brock and Tarbutt.

My dad and I, we started with the store. We built two apartments. Later on, we tacked on five additional apartments, so then we had seven apartments. Then nearby, there was another man that had a building with five apartments, and he wanted to get rid of it, so he talked my dad into buying that. My dad bought that, and after a few years, he bought an old house, and we recommissioned that house. And somehow or other, my dad made contact with Philpot and Delgaty Company, and he did a lot of work in rebuilding houses, rebuilding apartments, and so on and so on.

NP: Quite an impressive career for someone who came without the ability to talk. Sounds like he was very successful.

WZ: At the same time, we always had a cow, we always had pigs, we always had chickens, so those were on the go.

NP: Yes. Yeah. Living on West Gore, you were in sight of a couple of elevators.

WZ: Yes.

NP: So as a kid, did you spend any time around the elevators, whether you were supposed to or not? [Laughs]

WZ: Not a tremendous amount. My parents always believed in keeping me busy, and I didn't spend that much time--. Eventually what happened was, I had worked in the Canada Car in the summer for two months in two different years, and I was very, very thrilled at that time because I met Elsie MacGill. Does that name mean anything to you?

[0:20:02]

NP: Is she the engineer, the female engineer?

WZ: She was the woman engineer, yes. I can still picture her going in the Canada Car building at that time. I was always very impressed with that lady.

NP: She must have been quite a lady to be probably the lone female in that type of position.

WZ: That's right, she was.

NP: Now you had mentioned the starch plant. Where exactly was the starch plant? I know where the Ogilvie Elevator was on the west side of the Kam River.

WZ: Yes.

NP: Just at the end of Walsh Street.

WZ: What happened originally, if my memory serves correctly here, Ogilvie's had a flour mill there originally, and because they had a flour mill, they wanted to expand that flour mill operation. And so, they converted some of that flour mill operation to a wheat starch plant. And because I was looking for work, I went to, at a suggestion—and I've forgotten by who—that I talk to the principal of the Fort William Collegiate.

NP: Right, and you had mentioned that.

WZ: That's how that came about.

NP: So the starch plant, was right on the same property as the rest of the operation?

WZ: Yes. Yeah.

NP: Okay.

WZ: Yeah. That's where it ended up.

NP: And you mentioned it was a pretty basic plant?

WZ: It was.

NP: Or at least you were working in sort of the laboratory part of it, right?

WZ: Yes.

NP: So can you give us a description of what it looked like? If you have a picture of it later, we can look at it, or if that would help you now, I can just put this on pause.

WZ: I think I gave those pictures to the Thunder Bay Museum because I'm a member of the Museum. I'll have to double check that.

NP: Okay. And I can--. If you find that you have given them to them, fine. I'll track them down, and we can get a copy and add it to your file with your interview.

WZ: Right.

NP: So what does a starch plant lab look like?

WZ: Well, basically, it was very basic because the primary tests you do in a starch plant is you have to control the moisture of the raw material going in and the finished product coming out, and the protein. Those are the two main criterions. So--.

NP: This may seem like sort of a bone-headed question, but a starch plant just makes starch?

WZ: Yes, primarily. But then they've got to do something with the protein portion of it. The starch plant is, like the name signifies, starch, but then the secondary portion is called gluten, which is a protein product. Gluten, over the years, is used to fortify flour. Suppose you have flour that doesn't make good bread. You can add gluten to it, and it will fortify it because of the adjunct of the protein.

NP: I didn't realize that because Canada, after a while, just started to grow higher protein bread [*Note: Means "wheat." Editor*]. So previous to that, or even now, they were adding protein back in if necessary?

WZ: Well, it's a whole mess of things that starts to happen because in the meantime, the geneticists in general were working to upgrade the quality of each of these products. When you upgrade it, then you can charge more money for it on the marketplace, and it's just like a little vicious circle. You're scratching your back and making things work.

NP: So as the protein content of grains became--.

WZ: Became higher.

NP: Higher.

WZ: You can charge a better price for the bread and so on. The bread in the corner store would cost you maybe a couple of cents more because it's more nutritious.

[0:25:10]

NP: Now, is there a limit to that? You can put too much gluten in?

WZ: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It's quite a difference when you add the gluten to it because starch generally has a protein content of around-. Well, highly refined starch is practically all starch, which is carbohydrate, but no gluten. The gluten, on the other hand, when you have highly refined gluten, it may be 75 or 80 percent protein, but very little starch left. But then there's the moisture portion, there's a slight fat content, maybe 5 percent or that nature. There's ash. There's always ash in any product. Like any of these products I'm talking about, if you incinerate them, you always have ash left over. It's just like starting a bonfire. You've got ash when you're finished a bonfire.

NP: So the starch plant here, can you describe how it worked? In came a load of grain--.

WZ: Basically, the grain came into the elevator. It was ground through, they just call them rolls, actually. Depending on which specific part of the process it is, some rolls would have rifling in it, something like this placemat.

NP: Ridges, sort of.

WZ: Because it sort of helps to grab the grain and not let it slip through. But other parts would have a smoother surface, and you'd grind it finer and finer and finer until you get a product like typically what you have today when you buy flour. It's very finely ground.

NP: And then how is the starch actually separated from the gluten?

WZ: You make a thick dough first, and then you weaken it—if you want to use that term—with water, and you make it thinner and thinner.

NP: More watery?

WZ: More water. When you make it to the consistency that the process demands, you run it over reciprocating screens, and these screens generally run at an incline, and the so-called raw material hits the top of the screen and then slowly works its way down. As it's working its way down, it agglomerates the gluten, and the gluten becomes gobs of material. If you realize—as you often do—that you're going to want to ship this gluten somewhere, then you've got to dry it in a dryer. There are generally several, two or three, different methods used for drying that gluten. You generally ship it in heavy-walled paper bags.

NP: The kind that are stitched across the top?

WZ: That's right.

NP: Yeah.

WZ: That's right.

NP: What's happening to the starch? So we've got the gluten coming off as balls.

WZ: Right.

NP: What's happening to the starch?

WZ: The starch is generally--. They try to high-grade it, so what they do with the starch is they put it into vats. They put it into vats, and they acidify it normally with sulphuric acid—very strong sulphuric acid. The sulphuric acid breaks it down—the starch—breaks it down into sugars, and the sugars then, of course, are sold to confectioners and chocolate makers and whatever, icing sugar and what it would normally be used for.

[0:30:30]

NP: So the sugars are gone. What about the starch?

WZ: The starch, as I say, is also sold. The starch would be sold, as an example, to Neilson's—they were making chocolate bars—or whoever. It ends up in bakeries, of course, where you powder material so it doesn't stick together. That's the primary usage for it.

NP: Okay. So if I've got this right—and I may not because I've never been in a starch plant—so we have the pulverized grain coming through. It is made into a slurry type of mixture to the right liquidy consistency. It heads out onto the screens.

WZ: And these screens in the early days were made out of silk. Yes. Cost a lot of money to make that kind of screen. But gradually over time, nylon became the norm because nylon could stand all kinds of abrasions and so on.

NP: So would the silk be from China?

WZ: China normally. Yeah.

NP: Wow! Not a cheap operation, I would think.

WZ: Not really. Not really.

NP: So the gluten starts to roll out, sort on conglomerating. The starch and sugars, or if you say starch plant, you automatically mean sugar? I think of starch as being powdery non-sweet and sugar being powdery sweet.

WZ: Yeah, well, in the early days, the starch was used, well, to make bread, to powder bread so it didn't stick together. Whatever confectioners--. Confectioners would be the primary users for starch of all kinds. You can sort of tailor-made the starch to suit your operation, whatever it happened to be. Whether you're making confectioner's starch, or whether you're making laundry starch, or whether you're going to do anything in between--.

NP: Like corn starch?

WZ: Corn starch. Corn starch. Substitute the word corn for wheat in anything I've told you. Corn came first. Corn came first.

NP: Were they using corn here, then?

WZ: They were using corn way back when.

NP: Because Canada's not that well known for corn production.

WZ: No, because for a long time we didn't grow corn here, but you know, Kansas and middle United States, they grew one hell of a lot of corn starch, grew a lot of corn, rather, that was converted to starch over a period of time.

NP: How many people were working at the plant at that time, in the starch--?

WZ: The wee starch plant probably employed about 20 to 25 people. I was the only person working in the laboratory.

NP: And what was your job? Why were you doing the tests you were doing?

WZ: I was doing the tests I was doing for quality control purposes more than anything, and I didn't know anything. I mean all I had was Grade 13 and high school. I have no university as we speak. I never had any university training of any kind.

NP: Was somebody operating that plant at the time, the starch plant? Did you have a supervisor who told you what you were going to be doing?

WZ: There were a couple of chemists from the Winnipeg operation that Ogilvie's had, and they were kind of overseeing what I was doing until I got my feet on the ground.

NP: Now because I'm quite fond of elevators, when you started working at Ogilvie's, you were working at an elevator.

[0:35:13]

WZ: Yeah.

NP: Was that your first experience with--?

WZ: Yeah.

NP: And did you have any thoughts, reminiscences, about working at an elevator? What you liked about it, what you didn't like, what surprised you?

WZ: No, not really. First of all, it was because of my upbringing--. I was born in a household where you were expected to contribute to the family wellbeing. We always had chickens, we always had pigs, we always had a cow. We were self-sufficient as a family unit living close to where the Wayland Hotel sits today, as I mentioned.

NP: So how does that relate to the elevator? I'm thinking about the physical elevator, the ships coming in and out, that must have been novel for you.

WZ: Well, that was novel, but I learned at an early age that one had to adapt. It doesn't matter what you do, when you do it, and where you do it. You've got to adapt. And I didn't mind that. I always thought it was kind of fun. [Laughs]

NP: Oh, you're not alone. Most people I've talked to who worked in elevators like working in elevators.

WZ: Yeah, yeah. If you have it in your mind that you're going to make your job fun, it is fun. If it's going to be drudgery, it's going to beat you. I'm getting a charlie horse. **[Audio pauses]** Let's give it a whirl here.

NP: Okay. We can always just pause. Just let me know if you need a break. We took a bit of an exercise break, and I'm just curious about when did the starch plant start up?

WZ: In 1945.

NP: So that's--. You were part of the first crew that worked there?

WZ: Yes, I was.

NP: And if I've got my years right, you stayed there for about three years and then--.

WZ: About three years.

NP: I'm interested in the next group you moved onto, this K. A. Powell. What can you tell me about the company itself? And then we'll talk about the job you took on. Where were they?

WZ: Mr. Powell was headquartered in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Mr. Powell and Mr. Ross, they were entrepreneurs in the grain trade. They headquartered in Winnipeg, but they had connections here in Thunder Bay. They also owned Elevator E, F, and the Empire.

The Empire was at the mouth of the Kam River where the Kam River dumped into Lake Superior. The Empire, unfortunately, was what you called a wooden house. It was built out of wood, and a lot of equipment creates friction within an elevator. So something started a fire.

I was working at Edible Oils at the time the fire started in the Empire, and because I was a birder all my life, I could look with my binoculars from my laboratory window and see the Empire Elevator burning. So--.

NP: It must have been quite a fire.

WZ: Small world thing.

NP: Hm. After the interview, if you remind me, I'll tell you a story about the Empire that somebody else had told me and related to the fire.

WZ: Sure.

NP: So the K. A. Powell, then, did they operate under that name, or did they have a different company name?

WZ: That was the umbrella organization, K. A. Powell Canada Ltd. And I guess his accountant probably picked the name or whatever. Burt Hand was his accountant, I remember that.

NP: So they wouldn't have been the—and you may not know this—they wouldn't have been the ones who built Elevator E and F. They would have taken them over from someone else?

WZ: They took them over from somebody else. I should know, but I'm having a memory lapse here. I'm not sure whether it was a company called Consolidated Grain. I'm not sure.

[0:40:15]

NP: Yeah. Well, those three elevators along there—Western Grain, which became Pool 5--.

WZ: Pool 5.

NP: And then E and F--.

WZ: E and F.

NP: Their origins are a little fuzzy. So that's why I'm asking whoever I can for little pieces, and the little piece you provided might help me follow it back. If I know that K. A. Powell owned it, then I might be able to follow it back from when they bought it.

WZ: You might be able to get something out of the Thunder Bay Museum on those elevators.

NP: Mmhmm. Little bits and pieces everywhere.

WZ: I'm a member of the Museum, and I have for many, many years, but you know, sometime in the old saying, "There may be too many pots in the fire," or whatever. No, that's not it.

NP: Yeah, that is. Too many pots in the fire, yeah.

WZ: Too many pots in the fire. I was trying to keep everything going, and bear in mind, I started in the starch plant. I wasn't fully 17 years of age, and when I started at Edible Oils, I was 21 roughly and so on and so forth. And then as the years went by, I started working for the Canadian Grain Commission, and then I had to get into computers.

NP: So let's not skip too quickly over the K. A. Powell Edible Oil plants because I didn't even know we had one. So tell me about where was the Edible Oil plant, when was it built, how did it operate? What can you tell us about that?

WZ: Well, on Island Number Two, there was originally a corn starch plant.

NP: Do you know who owned that?

WZ: I should know.

NP: Well, I'll put a list of questions together and maybe you can track them down for me at some time, but don't worry about it now. But yes, the starch plant that's--. Or the--. Did you say there was a starch plant?

WZ: Corn starch.

NP: Corn starch plant. That's sort of almost across from the two elevators across the river, across the Mission River. Searle Elevator.

WZ: It's at the--. No. The corn starch plant--. Edible Oils was situated adjacent to the CPR tracks along Syndicate Avenue. It was a kind of a brown building.

NP: Is that that used to be an implement manufacturing company?

WZ: That was the flour mill.

NP: Oh.

WZ: Yeah.

NP: So at the end of Syndicate and Empire, approximately?

WZ: Front Street, I think, they called it. Front Street I think they called that street.

NP: But where would it be in relation to Jackknife Bridge?

WZ: It was on the north side of Jackknife Bridge. It would be between the CPR subway that goes to the river and the bridge.

NP: On the other side of the river from Ogilvie's? No.

WZ: No. No, no. Excuse me. We're talking the starch plant.

NP: No, actually, we were talking about the Edible Oil plant. So the Edible Oil plant was on Island Number Two?

WZ: The Edible Oil plant was on Island Number Two, and it never moved from there really.

NP: Is it still there?

WZ: The remnants of it are still there.

NP: So if I--. Island Number Two is where the Jackknife Bridge goes onto that island, right?

WZ: Yeah.

NP: And so if you come across the bridge, as you used to be able to, and you veer to your--.

WZ: Right.

NP: Right going towards Mission Marsh, there's a big--.

WZ: There's a whole mess of buildings.

NP: Right.

WZ: And a small elevator.

NP: Yes. So that was--?

WZ: That was Edible Oils Ltd.

NP: Oh, was it?

WZ: Yeah.

NP: Okay. So what did they make? They made edible oils out of what?

[0:45:06]

WZ: R--. No. Back up. Mustard seed.

NP: Really?

WZ: Mustard seed, yeah. They started off with mustard seed, and it was a tough sell because, first of all, nobody really wanted to formulate something made out of mustard seed, you know, because mustard had all kinds of connotations. In the war, of course, all kinds of people got gassed with mustard gas and so on and so forth. So there was all these connotations, and that's why, like I say, it was a real tough sell. But because Mr. Powell was the entrepreneur he was, he had connections for money with the banking people, and he had connections with other people that could help in all his enterprises.

When you mill flour, there's byproducts, just like anything else. So you mill flour, you grind wheat, you mill it, you get flour out of it. First, it's coarse flour, but then you try to high-grade it, if you will. As an example, you extract wheat germ oil, which has all kinds of uses in medicine, as you know, and other connotations too. So that's where Mr. Powell made his money. He didn't make it in the oil business really. He had made his money already. He had lots of money, and the people he was associated with were also making money in different aspects of the grain industry.

NP: Well, I'm surprised to hear they were using mustard for edible oil.

WZ: Because they could get it for free, literally. The cost of the raw material to them was practically nil. Everybody wanted to get rid of mustard.

NP: So I'm a little familiar with the development of canola oil or rapeseed oil, as it was once called.

WZ: Okay.

NP: And I'm thinking that in any of those oils, they're always trying to work with the formulations or the processing in order to get out off-flavours and so on. So did mustard oil have a particularly mustardy tasting--?

WZ: Very tart.

NP: Very tart?

WZ: Especially mustard oil was very, very tart. So-called canola or rapeseed oil was not near as tart because genetically there's much less hydrostatic acid, I think, in it.

NP: The mention of acid brings me back to a question I was going to ask earlier, and that was when you were talking about the separation of sugars and starch, was it at that stage or the stage where you're moving the gluten out, there was acid, sulphuric acid?

WZ: Sulphuric acid.

NP: That sort of raises little *Nee!* What became of the acid? It doesn't stay in the product, does it?

WZ: It's a little bit hard to explain, unless you have a little bit of a background in chemistry. Sulphuric acid is almost the strongest acid that there is. There are some others like hydroastatic acid and so on, but sulphuric acid is a very, very strong--. As a matter of fact, every time you've got to get your battery charged up in your car, well, just think within the cells of that battery, there is sulphuric acid. And because it is a strong oxidizer, it can create a--. Because it is the type of acid it is, it will create a current in a battery which will power a car or any piece of machinery.

[0:50:47]

NP: So what happens to it? You don't have to get technical if you don't need to, but what happens as an agent from breaking up--.

WZ: As it ages, it gets weaker and weaker.

NP: No, but as it--. When you're using it to separate out parts of wheat, what—and you get the starch and the sugars or the starch and the gluten—what happens to the acid?

WZ: It's actually used up in whatever process you're working on. Like, if you want to think again of an automobile battery, it's sulphuric acid that drives and produces the electrical current in that battery, and it is the sulphuric acid that causes that to happen. I don't know whether it's worth getting too technical about it.

NP: Probably not. So is it possible to say that at the end of the reaction that--.

WZ: The sulphuric acid--.

NP: The sulphuric acid uses itself up, and there's no trace elements of the acid left in the products?

WZ: That's right. That's right. That's it exactly.

NP: Okay. Similar to talking to a person who was mentioning what they used to get rid of bugs in grain where they drop some kind of chemical into it. And I said, "Ah, chemicals into the grain." He says, "Well, it dissipates by the time it sort of--. It disappears by the time it's--. At least down to small amounts that are trace elements that you don't need to worry about."

WZ: I'm just trying to think of an easier way to explain it, and I'm not doing a very good job of it.

NP: That's okay. We're not here for a science lesson, so let's move on. [Laughing] We were talking about K. A. Powell. So did Mr. Powell--. He lived in Winnipeg.

WZ: Yes.

NP: Did you meet him?

WZ: Oh, many times.

NP: Yeah? He was around?

WZ: Many times he came.

NP: He was hands-on?

WZ: Eh?

NP: He was a hands-on person?

WZ: Yes. Mr. Powell, his partner was J. Gordon Ross. His other partner was A. H. Hand, Burt Hand. So this troika basically ran the show. They also operated the two elevators, and they had some loose connection with Senator Paterson.

NP: Did any of them live in Thunder Bay?

WZ: No.

NP: So who were the on-site managers then?

WZ: Only the people that they needed to--. Like the starch plant itself--.

NP: The Edible Oils plant?

WZ: The Edible Oils plant, I should say, was run--. How did it go? **[Audio pauses]** They brought in Wally--.

NP: If you can't remember his name, that's fine.

WZ: Oh, God. I should remember his name. He was originally from Thunder Bay. His mother lived, I think, on Marks Street. Wally, Wally. Oh, my God.

[0:55:15]

NP: Had he moved to Winnipeg and then they brought him back to operate the plant?

WZ: Yeah.

NP: Was the plant new when you--?

WZ: No, it was a corn starch plant originally. So it wasn't new. And of course, in the war, it was a shell plant.

NP: Well, that's a multipurpose building.

WZ: Yeah. It was a marvellously built building. Strongly built. Like when you look at the buildings even as they stand today, the lower tiers were probably that thick, and then gradually--.

NP: About two feet thick?

WZ: Yeah. And then they got thinner and thinner, of course, as they got right up to the top.

NP: What was your job there?

WZ: My job?

NP: Yeah, at the Edible Oils.

WZ: Oh, it was established--. The Edible Oils plant was established in Thunder Bay because this was where all the terminal elevators were. When they brought grain from the Prairies, they brought them in through the terminal elevators, and they cleaned out the mustard seed. They cleaned out the mustard seed. Basically, they got it for nothing. Okay? And then, I was lucky enough to start working in the wheat starch plant first, like I was telling you, and then I was lucky enough to begin working in the vegetable oil plant.

NP: How did that transition take place?

WZ: I was out of work for a very short time it seems to me, but when I applied for the job, they figured because I had a little bit of background, that background could be used to their advantage, and that's what we did. It's too bad I gave the pictures to the Museum, but the Museum has them that you can look at them.

NP: Yeah, I'll track them down.

WZ: It's a black book about that long and this wide, and they're glossy pictures. I don't think I kept even one single picture here.

[Audio pauses]

NP: So coming back on again to the interview. We left the interview talking about how Mr. Powell and his partners found a business opportunity—or tried to—with mustard seed, but mustard seed was not that well-received as an oil, mustard seed oil. So what else did they then try at the Edible Oil plant?

WZ: That's when they went to colza oil or rapeseed oil.

NP: Coza oil?

WZ: Colza, C-O-L-Z-A. It's not a term that's well-known or seen, even.

NP: What is that?

WZ: It's just another name for rapeseed.

NP: Ah, okay.

WZ: Yeah. A lot of people are sensitive to using that word rape to the present day. I've run into people many times, "Rape?" You're having a real nice conversation, and then you nonchalantly throw in "rape" and oh, my God. You'd almost think that--.

NP: It was a cuss word.

WZ: Yeah. It was a cuss word.

NP: So during your career, then, it switched from rapeseed to canola seed? I think there was some chemical work too that changed it from--.

WZ: Well, the word rape comes from *rapus* [sic], which is rapeseed, okay?

[1:00:09]

NP: And is canola the same as rapeseed, or is it a different variation?

WZ: Not really. What came first, is it the chicken or the egg or the horse or the wagon? You know what I'm getting at here. But that's basically where it came from or was used.

NP: Did they use corn at all, or was it just too expensive?

WZ: Did they use corn?

NP: At Edible--?

WZ: Canada grew very little corn way back when. Southeastern Ontario grew corn, but even like--. Our rail system was meant to move grain from the west to the east, not the other way around, so nobody was going to turn around and start shipping corn from southern Ontario to Thunder Bay to process it, as an example, or whatever.

NP: So your job at Edible Oils, then, was it very similar to your job at Ogilvie's or different?

WZ: Quite similar, but like I say, when you see the pictures from the Museum, you'll see that my lab in the starch plant--. Well, it would be about the size of our living room, just a trifle longer.

NP: 15 by 25, perhaps?

WZ: Roughly that. In the vegetable oil plant, it was a hell of a big lab. The most beautiful lab there was in Thunder Bay because of the Americans that were the push behind it partly. A man by the name of A. J. Laminin, Arthur J. Laminin, E. V. Lindsey, Ernie Vincent Lindsey. He lived on—when he was here—he lived on Mary Street, back of our store there. Laminin lived close to the car barns over here. Burt Hand was--. Well, he didn't live in Thunder Bay. But the glossy pictures give everything, a better feel, a better grasp of what's what there.

NP: Now, you mentioned that Fryer did these pictures, so did the company hire Fryer to come in and take photographs?

WZ: Yes. Yeah. By sheer chance, my daughter worked for Fryer later on because my younger daughter works, now, she works for Hallmark Cards Canada, I think I told you.

NP: Mmhmm. So what happened eventually to that plant?

WZ: It's still there.

NP: In a bit of disrepair.

WZ: I drive past it quite often because I keep going to Mission Marsh to do photography and so on. It became--. It got kicked around. Different people were trying to use it for different things, and I've lost track a little bit as to what their goal was. It was mainly to do with wood, a finishing wood of some kind.

NP: What happened to K. A. Powell's operation?

WZ: Office?

NP: Operation. Like what--?

WZ: Well, he grew--. Well, all the officers of the company grew old, and one of the things--. At one time, they got hold of a man, if my memory serves correctly, had probably—I don't know why this number keeps popping up here—20,000 apartments in Vancouver. And I met him and talked to him, and he'd come--. The odd time, he'd come in a private plane to the airport, and I'd have to go and meet him. I've had a funny life in a lot of ways.

[1:05:57]

A guy with only a Grade 13 education, and the kind of people I was dealing with was mind boggling. They sent me to London, Ontario, to Labatt's at one point. Mr. Labatt used to be squired around London, Ontario, in a chauffeured limousine like I never saw before. And not only that, to the present day, I can visualize me walking around some of the Talbot Street in London, Ontario, when suddenly, a policeman who was on standby would go dashing out into the middle of the street and stop traffic in four directions. And yours truly, stupid as he was, walked up to this officer and said, "What's all the commotion about?" "Don't you know? That's Mr. Labatt who owns Labatt Breweries and God knows what else." [Laughs]

NP: My goodness! So this fellow from Vancouver who owned a lot of apartments, what was he doing here do you think? Or did you know?

WZ: They were looking into--. Well, let me see. How did that come about exactly? They got him here, basically, because this guy owned so much real estate. I think they were trying to trap some of his resources, his money. Show me the money kind of thing. And like I say, I was in Vancouver, you know. I could easily be getting some of this mixed up because when I left the vegetable oil plant, I started working for the federal government.

NP: Mhmm. We'll move onto that, but I doubt the federal government had anything to do with a guy flying in on a private jet from Vancouver. [Laughs]

WZ: Well, no. But the guy that hired me for the Canadian Grain Commission was a Welshman from Wales, Dr. Phil Williams. Excuse me.

[Audio pauses]

NP: When you're ready to go.

WZ: Basically, first of all, they couldn't get enough rapeseed—mustard seed—to process after a while because 24D was killing off the mustard. So the mustard wasn't growing, *blah, blah, blah*, so they were looking for alternates, and that's how they got around to canola. Canola was coming into its own in Canada. Of course, canola has been grown in Europe forever. I made a number of trips to Vancouver because Phil Williams was my boss, essentially.

[1:10:29]

NP: When you moved over to the Grain Commission.

WZ: When I went over to the Grain Commission.

NP: But if we stay with the Edible Oils group, they had trouble getting--.

WZ: They had trouble getting raw material. So that's why it died.

NP: Was that what did them in? It died.

WZ: That's why it died, basically.

NP: Now, what—since we're talking about its death—what happened to Elevator E and F? Did they own those until the end?

WZ: They owned Elevator E and F.

NP: And the Empire.

WZ: And the Empire. The Empire burnt down to the ground.

NP: In '68 or something like that. Yeah.

WZ: And I watched it burn.

NP: Yeah, you had mentioned that. Did they, the Powell and partners, did they continue to own E and F until the time that the Edible Oil plant also went out of existence? Did they sell them all at the same time?

WZ: There was a space in time that, at the moment, I'm fuzzy on.

NP: Well, that's okay. You know what we haven't really talked about though is the work that you did at the Edible Oil plant. Was it essentially the same work that you were doing at the starch plant?

WZ: Yes.

NP: Doing quality control?

WZ: Yes, but much more was involved, much more technical was involved.

NP: And did you just build those skills yourself over time, or did you get additional training?

WZ: Everything was on the job training, depending on the situation. But I've had such a funny life for all kinds of reasons. In other ways too because Phil Williams knew a hell of a lot more about it than I did, but computers were—what is the phrase I'm looking for—were developed for the US Navy in the Second World War to help in determining and controlling the trajectory of firepower aboard naval ships.

And in essence, that was the beginning of the computer age, although a lot of people don't know it. They stand on television and take credit for this, that, and something else, but because of the Second World War, computers were developed to control firepower aboard US naval ships.

NP: Since you've been talking about Mr. Williams, and we haven't really moved over from the Edible Oils plant, eventually the Edible Oils plant went out of business.

WZ: Yes.

NP: Did they just close up shop, or did they sell the building to somebody else?

WZ: They sold the building to Thunder Bay Planing, which was a woodworking outfit, and it was operating for a lot of years. Although, when I pass it today, it's gated and whatever.

NP: Yeah. So were you still working there, then, when they closed up shop, and then you moved to the Canadian Grain Commission? Or had you made the move to the Canadian Grain Commission?

[1:15:08]

WZ: I had made the move to the Canadian Grain Commission.

NP: So how did that move come about?

WZ: Well, that was also one of those things because I got into trouble there.

NP: Not at the Edible Oil plant?

WZ: Not at the Edible Oil plant.

NP: So let's just talk about the move to the Grain Commission. You moved to the Grain Commission because--? Why? Why did you move to the Grain Commission?

WZ: Well, I was married. I still had to have a living, and I found out that the Grain Commission was moving into the post office building beside the Gardens. But then I got into trouble there.

NP: Yes. Well, we'll talk about that later, but let's talk about the time when you weren't in trouble. So--.

WZ: Okay.

NP: Was there a job advertised? Or did you go on spec?

WZ: It came about as near as I can think of it through Phil, through Phil Williams.

NP: Had you known him before?

WZ: He recommended it.

NP: So had you known Phil because of your job with the Edible Oil group, or how did you meet Mr. Williams? Do you recall?

WZ: I've got to think about that for a bit because some of these things overlap. I used to have a hell of a good memory, but it ain't anymore.

NP: Well, I think back on my career, and I can't even remember the names of my office mates. You're doing very well.

WZ: Like I say, there was another gentleman that lived in the States that was involved in the development of computers. Like I say, the computers were developed for the US Navy to control their firepower, but exactly the ifs, ands, and buts, maybe I'm--. I'll probably wake up at 3:00 in the morning and say, "Eureka!"

NP: Okay. I'm going to put it on pause for a bit. **[Audio pauses]** Finish this off then. Oops. We are just going to end the interview for today, and I'll talk to Wally about setting up a second interview to finish off his career with the Grain Commission and talk about their pretty sophisticated operation in Thunder Bay related to their lab. So signing off for now.