

This recording is an interview with Gerry White, a retired Local 502 longshoreman and former union local president. The interview was conducted in White's home, which he shares with his wife Fiona who was also interviewed for this series. The major themes of this interview are the work of a longshoreman and Local 502.

Interviewers: Andrea Walisser, Michelle La

Interviewee: Gerry White

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Date range of topics covered: 1958-present

Sound Recording Length: 1:09:38

White grew up in Surrey and attended high school in Newton. On January 10, 1961, at the age of 19, he got his first work as a longshoreman. He became a member 4 1/2 years later in 1965, and became the business agent for the local in 1970. For an unspecified period in the 1980s he served as a vice-president and then president of Local 502. His date of retirement is not stated in the recording.

Section 0:00:00 – 0:03:35

- In this section, White talks about how he got involved in longshoring. He reports that he was a high school friend of Joe Breaks. He went to high school in Newton, Surrey. He says Breaks went ahead of him to become a longshoreman first. White's father argued with him to go get a job, so on January 10, 1961 he went to the longshore hall to get a job. His first day of work was in the pouring rain. He reports that getting a longshore job was easier than it is now, you just went to the hall, would be given a work number, and then would be placed on the causal boards. Today it is not possible for a young person to just show up and ask for work.

Section 0:03:36 – 0:06:00

- In this section, White talks about the nature of the work. He said when he first started the work was hard. You would have to lift lumber, bars of lead, bars of zinc, sack fertilizer, sack coffee. Sacks weighed 112 lbs. Lead bars weighed 100 lbs. You worked with the gang you were dispatched to, and you got on-the-job training, you got yelled at a lot if you did not do what you were supposed to do. Gangs had 13 members, with 8 working below deck. If you couldn't do the work you got sent back to the hall.

Section 0:06:01 – 0:08:16

- In this section, White talks about how he first got started on the waterfront. He says he was 19 when he got his first casual job in 1961. Other guys were working before that age. He was told by his father to stay in school and graduate. Gerry wanted to go to university to become a lawyer, but there was no money for that, so he went to work. He says he liked the job, and that many kids in the region ended up on the waterfront in the '60s and '70s. There was lots of work, lots of variety, and lots of spare time.

Section 0:08:17 – 0:12:19

- In this section, White revisits the topic of types of jobs on the waterfront, as well as how New Westminster differed from Vancouver. He talks about the Colombo Plan as a reason for the export sacks of fertilizer. He liked driving the crane. He says after the 1970s that's when all the automation, containerization and packaged lumber came in. He says that the manual labour he did was "work work" and that the automated work afterwards was better because it

was easier, but also because hand stowing cargo required more intense concentration. He said his least favourite work was handling animal hides even though it was done primarily in Vancouver. New Westminster was primarily for lead products, metal ore and lumber, particularly through the Pacific Coast Terminal (PCT). Vancouver was primarily for general cargo including stored goods, and could accommodate more ships because it was bigger.

Section 0:12:20 – 0:14:58

- In this section, White talks about how one came to know what it meant to be in the union. Prior to 1958 there was no pension, so there was a major strike and a slow-down. He said it was pretty tough before 1958, and there was no protection for workers in terms of safety. He said that the people who made up the workforce at the time were veterans from World War II, from logging camps, (“which were their own horror story,”) and a lot of guys from the Prairie farms. So people were strong, mentally and physically.

Section 0:14:59 – 0:18:07

- In this section, White talks about people in the workforce. He describes an accident in which he was trapped under a stack of heavy “3x9’s,” at which point Lance Horton came over and lifted the materials off of him. He said many men came and went through the waterfront because some could not or would not do the job. He describes it as “feast or famine” by which he means people already had families to feed so they couldn’t wait around on the casual boards. He was okay with the casual boards, however, because it meant that sometimes you didn’t have to work. White got married in 1964 or ‘65.

Section 0:19:20 – 0:23:00

- In this section, White talks about “moving up” the boards. He said moving up from the casual board to the next board was developed over time, and it was numbers driven and based on hours, there was an A, B, C, and D board, and there was a membership board, the ultimate goal. White achieved his membership after 4.5 years. New members would be admitted at the regular members’ meeting. It tended to happen every month if there were openings, but usually less than that, and dependent on numbers and whether or not it’s busy.

Section 0:23:01 – 0:28:31

- In this section, White talks about bars in New Westminster, and then about alcohol and its transshipment. He says that in New Westminster there used to be Dunsmuir Hotel, known colloquially as “The Bucket of Blood,” the Windsor Hotel, which was been torn down to make way for a highrise, the King Edward Hotel on Columbia Street. In his first or second year on the job he was in Vancouver and on a booze ship. He said there were many fumes coming from the shipped liquor. The ship had a bad crossing, and it contained Scotch from the United Kingdom, the bottom layer of which had been smashed. Shipped goods were often busted or smashed, for which longshoremen would sometimes get extra “salvage” pay. Most of the stuff that came in was from Europe or the East Coast – growth in trade from Japan and the rest of Asia was slowly starting to happen. Sometimes stuff would be stolen from ships, though rarely because ship crew would often offer longshoremen free things in order to prevent theft.

Section 0:28:32 – 0:29:45

- In this section, White talks about how the ship crew and longshoremen got along. The ship crews did their regular ship maintenance duties and did not engage in any longshoring themselves.

Section 0:29:46 – 0:37:25

- In this section, White talks more about the gang system and the regulation of longshoremen's labour. He says people moved along in their seniority and people moved onwards along the same pace. Unlike Breaks, who took a "steady job at Fraser Surrey" docks, White liked driving topside, so they would only cross paths once in a while. Break's was more regular work, like a 9-5 job. Before becoming a member, you would have to go into the hall daily to get work. Otherwise, when you were a member and in a gang, you could call in to be dispatched instead of going to the hall. However, most men, even members, went into the hall every day. There was a morning (8:00-5:00) and afternoon (5:00-11:00) dispatch, but no overnight. He talks about strikes in 1966 and 1969. 1969 is when government passed the Ports Operation Act. "They" came and told the union and the employer that if they failed to go back to work they would use the army to do it.

Section 0:37:26 – 0:46:17

- In this section, he talks a bit more about strikes, unions and labour/safety. He said Local 502 was on strike for thirty days in 1969, and it would involve just going down to the union and sitting down with your work partner and waiting out the strike. In 1970, he ran for business agent and won. Local 502 has no lifetime appointees and you're up for re-election every year. The business agent is part-time dispatcher, if there are any safety or manning issues, or if anyone gets fired, you have to go down and argue with the employer or the employer's representative. One tricky situation White encountered was having to advocate on behalf of an employee who showed up drunk. He said "the job always had to go on," so this worked to the advantage of the union. White reports that there were often safety issues aboard the ships and the longshoremen would refuse to work until the ship was repaired. "If the ship could work in the New Westminster, it could work anywhere." New Westminster had a high safety standard. Longshoremen had a right to refuse to work based on safety. It was everyone's job to inspect the ships they were working in for safety and keep an eye out.

Section 0:46:18 – 0:52:20

- In this section, White resumes talking about his union roles. He was Vice-President and President in the early 80s and then got out of it again. At Westshore he was on the negotiating committee. He was never a shop steward but was usually engaged. White says being on the executive, especially president, was challenging because it was a 24-hour job. He once had to knock on the door of a family of a longshoreman who had died on the job. The man was killed when his car was hit on the dock by an oncoming forklift.

Section 0:52:21 – 0:54:30

- In this section, White talks about union leadership training and safety training.

Section 0:54:31 – 1:04:04

- In this section, White talks about women on the waterfront and longshoremen of different races. He said it had been mostly people of white European background, including an influx of people from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. People from East Indian descent started

showing up on the waterfront largely from the 1980s into the 1990s. The hall now looks like the “United Nations”. White admits that there was some pushback against people from India, in part, he believes, because the first Indian immigrants were not very strong, but Canadian-born Indians have are more able to do the job. Women struggled at first, but especially with the development of jobs that did not require as much physical labour, women became more involved in the workforce of Local 502. The first woman to get hired on the waterfront was hired by the president before White, and she was the wife of a member who died in an industrial accident. 50 or 60 car drivers quit en masse. White says this happened mostly because the president had not gone through the proper channels but also because women were not on the waterfront.

Section 1:04:05– 1:05:39

- In this section, White tells a story about Lorne Briggs, the longshoreman who saved his life. They were covering up the hatch, when White tripped, went forward to go into the open hatch, and Briggs grabbed him back. “You’re not getting out of work that easy,” said Briggs.

Section 1:05:40 – 1:08:06

- In this section, White notes that Local 502 used to criticize Vancouver because it was too large, whereas Local 502 was more united and smaller.

Section 1:08:07 – 1:09:38

- In this section, White talks about the former King Neptune Restaurant, which he said had an international reputation. The City of New Westminster wanted to get the docks and the shipping companies out of New Westminster for whatever reason, so they split it in half, loaded it up and shipped it to either Sechelt or Gibson’s Landing, and he isn’t aware if it has been re-established.