

This recording is an interview of Bill Ward, a New Westminster resident who worked in the lumber industry for almost 40 years, as a labourer, millwright, welder, and mechanic. The main themes of the interview are the processing of lumber, the mechanization of the lumber industry, and his various roles at Alaska Pines Company Mill.

Interviewers: Michelle La, Andreas Hovland

Interview date: July 11th 2014

Date Range: 1939-1978

Sound Recording Length: 01:18:46

Bill Ward started working on the waterfront in July 1939. He got the job at Alaska Pine as a labourer, leaving to join the Army for 5 years. During his stint in the Army, he was trained as a mechanic, and was hired back at Alaska Pine when he returned to New Westminster. He later trained as a millwright and a welder, and maintained the machinery at the mill until he retired in 1978. He discusses the work he did throughout his career, and talks about the union, the big fire in 1966, and the dangers of the job, as well as interactions with engineers, changes over the years, and the processing of lumber itself.

Section 00:00 – 03:30

In this portion of the interview, Bill describes where he first started working on the waterfront, at the foot of 4th Street, in 1939. He worked as a labourer for the original Alaska Pines Mill, trimming and stencilling lumber in the “trim shed”. He was 19 years old, and started at “two bits” (25 cents) an hour. By the time he joined the War, he had made it to 55 cents an hour. They introduced a second shift to increase productivity. After the War, a third shift was introduced. The mill would go on and off of 24 hour shifts, and would increase or decrease shifts based on the demand for lumber.

Section 03:31 – 05:17

In this section, Bill describes the trees used by the mills. Trees were harvested from along the coast of BC. Logs were stored on the river, and then either brought to Alaska Pine (Rayonier), or the Marpole mill. Hemlock was used at first, as it made good paper, but fir was preferred. There were also two associated pulp mills, located near Squamish and on Vancouver Island.

Section 05:18 – 08:29

In this section, Bill talks about how he got his job. He had been doing work for a sign painter at the time, and also lived on a lot that had 3 huge tree stumps, which he was working to remove. He would work during the morning, then hop on his bike and ride around to the mills, looking for a job. He got the job in the trim shed because he was able to stencil. Six people would work in the trim shed – two loading the saw, two piling away the lumber, and two stencilling the lumber. They would rotate positions every two hours.

Section 08:30 – 11:41

In this section of the interview, Bill talks more about working in the trim shed. A government official he calls the “P.L.I.B. man” would inspect their work. Bill said that they did such a good job, the P.L.I.B. man asked if they had any friends looking for work, and 3 additional men were

hired on, including Bill's cousin. He guesses that there were around 65 people working in the mill on a given shift. He compares this to his son's experiences in the lumber industry, who has also retired.

Section 11:42 – 12:38

In this section, Bill describes the export of lumber. The largest consumer is the USA, as well as China. The majority of the lumber produced at Alaska Pine was shipped to either the States or to England.

Section 12:39 – 17:02

In this portion of the interview, Bill describes the process of converting trees into lumber, from start to finish. The logs would come in on the boom from the water, up the "log haul", and cut into pieces. Eventually, "barkers" were introduced. Before that, water was used to wash the logs, but it wouldn't remove the bark. The mill in New Westminster started almost exclusively processing cedar, as the equipment could handle the tough bark. Cedar pulp was made into paper. Sawdust was caught by "shakers" and shipped to Japan, to be pressed into boards. Cedar bark was used for filling under the road near Burnaby Lake. The mill in Marpole stuck to processing hemlock. Hemlock bark was made into mulch, and lubricants for oil drilling. The New Westminster mill production was comparable to much larger mills at the time.

Section 17:03 – 22:32

In this section, Bill talks about how he came back to the mill after being a mechanic in the Army for 5 years. He came back as maintenance at first, but later joined a millwright crew, then a welding crew, which he eventually ran. He took over the position of Chief Mechanic after the former chief had a heart attack. He found a big difference between the New Westminster and Marpole mills in terms of workers. He retired from the mill in 1978, at age 58, and went into business for himself, doing maintenance for local businesses until age 75. He also fabricated metal machine parts for local businesses.

Section 22:33 – 25:30

In this section, Bill elaborates on working as a supervisor in the mill. He says most problems were "personal," because if there was a problem with the machinery, he would solve it. Supervisors were sent to "charm school," where they would meet with higher-ups to discuss problems. There was also a union.

Section 25:31 – 29:14

In this section, Bill talks more about the union. They worked hard and helped a lot, but Bill also feels that it held people back in some ways, such as getting a raise. He describes "categories" which determined your ability to receive a raise. He mentions that he retired at the urging of his doctor, as he had health concerns. Bill currently has carpal tunnel syndrome, but doesn't know if his mill work is related. He had a friend who also worked at the mill with similar issues.

Section 29:15 – 33:57

In this section, Bill elaborates more on the unionized workplace. He attended meetings very rarely, as there was a lot of arguing. Alaska Pine was part of the IWA (International Woodworkers of America), which formerly had a Local on 8th and 12th. He thinks it was a good

thing overall. He tells a story about a big job, where a co-worker was injured due to heavy lifting, and the Union had to fight for compensation. Bill attended the meeting to testify.

Section 33:58 – 38:40

In this section, Bill describes the fire at Alaska Pines that occurred in 1966. He was on holidays at the time, but two of his mechanics were working when it happened. He had it described to him by a firefighter as a “comedy of errors.” They were told that kids had set the grass on fire between Alaska Pines and Scott Paper Mill. There were sprinklers in place, set to go off, but there was no water, as the pump from the river was shut off along with the rest of the electricity. There was also a pump used for washing logs that could have been diverted to fight the fire, but the powerhouse was shut down for a boiler inspection. There was only one building left standing, but there were no casualties. He said they were very careful and clean in the mill, to avoid risk of fire. There was an individual in charge of fire safety on site, and safety meetings were held very regularly.

Section 38:41 – 42:10

In this portion of the interview, Bill talks about the dangers of working in a mill. There was a risk of injury from the sawblades, machinery malfunctions, and electrocution, as well as various other accidents. They wore safety glasses and other equipment.

Section 42:11 – 44:25

In this section, Bill talks about the credentials required for work. Journeyman’s tickets were required in later years, and Bill was asked to get a Boiler Ticket as a welder, as a condition of employment. You would get 5 cents more per hour if you had a ticket, and they would do it onsite at the mill on weekends. Later, you had to go to a trade school to get a ticket.

Section 44:26 – 47:50

In this section, Bill describes the competition between mills. Mills would specialize in different things, such as cedar siding. There was competition for sales of lumber products. The owners of Alaska Pine would host picnics, trips, and a big Christmas party. It was a family business, run by 3 brothers.

Section 47:51 – 48:35

In this section, Bill describes the hours he worked. A lot of the time, he would work 7 days a week. There were no set hours, and he would work until the job was finished.

Section 48:36 – 50:10

In this portion of the interview, Bill talks about why he stayed at Alaska Pine for so long. He loved doing maintenance and rebuilding things, and he found the work challenging. He got to work closely with the industrial engineer.

Section 50:11 – 52:36

In this portion of the interview, Bill describes the experience he gained working as a mechanic during the War, repairing vehicles. The manager of Alaska Pine was waiting for him to come back.

Section 52:37 – 56:49

In this section, Bill talks about early issues he had with the engineers on site. He said that it took him just going ahead and building something how they asked, which quickly failed, to prompt a meeting which encouraged the engineers to trust him more.

Section 56:50 – 59:20

In this section, Bill talks about the mechanization of the industry. Automatic green chains, and other automated systems, required the electricians to go to school; machinery “breaks down, and you fix it.” He doesn’t think that it has reduced the number of workers.

Section 59:21 – 01:01:11

In this portion of the interview, Bill talks about training. He was trained as a welder on the job, before you needed a ticket.

Section 01:01:12 – 01:03:00

In this portion of the interview, Bill discusses the diversity of people working at Alaska Pines. He mentions that the people that built Pacific Veneer were Jewish Czechs. Women worked in the box factory (shook mill) during the war.

Section 01:03:01 – 01:07:04

In this section, Bill remembers watching the “Head Sawyer,” who was responsible for positioning the log in the water. Eventually, those positions became automated. He also recalls how logs were much larger in the past. If a log was too big, it would be “dogged” and sawed right in the water. Alaska Pines had one big beehive burner, which was used less in later years. He discusses the problems with sawdust in the water and ash in the air.

Section 01:07:05 – 01:09:25

In this section, Bill talks about all the industries that have left the waterfront. He feels that “you need to change with the times,” and sees the evolution of the waterfront as progress.

Section 01:09:26 – 01:11:35

In this portion of the interview, Bill talks about the connection to the longshoring industry, since Alaska Pine produced packaged lumber, which would be brought to the Overseas dock by truck. He knew a few longshoremen, and remembers big ships coming to Fraser Mills to load lumber.

Section 01:11:36 – 01:18:46

In the final portion of the interview, Bill talks about living in Princeton when he was younger, because there was no work in New Westminster during the 1920’s. He mentions going to the Fraser Cafe, and the Royal City Cafe for dinner when he was working. His wife remembers going to the King Neptune. Bill recalls going to the Edison and the Columbian theatres for 25 cents. He tells the story of how he met his wife through his cousin.