

This recording is an interview with former ILWU Local 502 longshoreman Brian Ringrose in his home in Delta. The major themes of this interview are work and union issues, especially professionalization of longshore work.

Interviewers: Andrea Walisser; Peter Hall

Interviewee: Brian Ringrose

Date: 11 June 2013

Date range: 1963 to 2006.

Sound Recording Length: 1:33:42

In 1963, Brian Ringrose quit high school. His father persuaded him to head down to the longshoremen's hall and get registered for work. By 1971 he officially became a "member", and by 1976 he was able to secure a role as a business agent. He continued to do office jobs with the longshoremen for the next twenty-six years, including a stint as president of Local 502. In this interview, Ringrose talks about his various roles with the union and what it was like to work as a longshoreman. He talks about the various job duties of a longshoreman, as well as the locations of work, the people he encountered on the waterfront, the reputation of Local 502 in the longshoring and shipping world, and the trials and tribulations of being the Local 502 president.

Section 0:00:00 – 0:09:44

- In this portion of the interview Ringrose describes his start as a longshoreman beginning in 1963. When he started, he said his father—who was also a longshoreman, as was Ringrose's brother—gave him the following advice "Do three things: keep your head up, your mouth shut, and your ears open." He describes jobs that were good and bad. The good work was lifting sacks of flour because it was not heavy lifting. Bad work included handling nickel matte whereby one's "fingers [would get] destroyed." He notes that when he first started out there was no health and safety training or proper equipment provided except for cork boots for "log jobs." He notes that the work culture was typified by "hard working men" in a "hardcore" environment, and because of this workers did not initially want a lot of health and safety training or equipment.

Section 0:09:45 – 0:19:28

- Ringrose describes the nature of employment in this section by talking first about the "gangs" on the site. You did not join a gang when you first started. He notes that he first joined one in the "early 70s." He described work partners, including his first, Doug, who unfortunately drank too much. His gang included Douglas and two sling men, and the others were "fill-ins." Other workers would go to Westshore and you wouldn't see each other as much. Nowadays there is no gang structure anymore. Ringrose said that the gang structure was good because it kept guys together. If one wasn't "cutting it," one would be told about it, and sometimes men were not a good fit for the work site if you were either not physically capable or if you were a slacker. A lot of people would leave the waterfront for different reasons. He also describes the process of registering and receiving a registration number. There is a further brief discussion here about Ringrose's father encouraging him to go to work as a longshoreman, and about being from North Delta. There are a lot of family connections on the waterfront, despite new government regulations about "nepotism."

Section 0:19:29 – 0:21:47

- In this section, the different locations of work are described. Ringrose says he became a “member” in 1971, which, he says was an average span of time from when he began working (1963) for someone to become a member. He speaks of his work at Fraser Mills, Pacific Coast Terminals and Overseas Terminals, the car dock/auto terminals, a berth on the other side of the Massey Tunnel called the “Rice Mills” where they unloaded pineapples, Searle’s Elevator, Vancouver. Some guys did go to Vancouver Island. At Fraser Mills only small ships could pass under the Pattullo Bridge; mill workers carried the cargo to the ship and then longshoremen loaded the ships.

#### Section 0:21:48 – 0:25:32

- In this section he talks about people he worked with. These include people of different nationalities, including French-speaking men from Maillardville. There were a lot of “tough men” including former veterans. One ship was flying the Japanese flag, the “Rising Sun,” instead of the Canadian flag, which was supposed to have been flown upon entering Canadian waters. This caused the men on the waterfront, some of whom had been captured at Hong Kong during World War II, to tell younger workers like Ringrose, to not do any work on the ship until the proper flag was flown. One man had his leg damaged in the Korean War and still did the tough work that everyone did on the waterfront. There were a lot of “characters” including Curly Smith, a heavy-drinker who wore a sports jacket and shoes with no socks.

#### Section 0:25:33 – 27:24

- In this section, Ringrose talks about shifts and trying to get work. He notes that there were many times when he would go to work and not get any shifts. There were only two shifts a day when he first started, not “7/24” as there is today. There was a day shift and an afternoon shift. The afternoon shift was from 5:00pm to 11:30pm. The times of the day shift are not identified.

#### Section 27:25 – 34:46

- Ringrose notes that Westshore Terminals opened in 1971 or 1972, and that the BCMEA “threatened” workers who went to work for Westshore because Westshore was under a different contract. One time when he got into an argument with a foreman, he was suspended for three days. During his suspension he worked for one day at Westshore, but decided not to ever go back. He hated the work there because it was just loading coal. When he was suspended, his gang quit in solidarity. Quitting in this context meant losing a night’s pay, rather than losing the job completely. The foreman had been drinking as well, and Ringrose says that there was lots of drinking on the waterfront “from the top down.” He says that alcohol could be bought from the crew of ships as well. He said customs in those days were not around a lot, and alcohol was cheap. The union, says Ringrose, later worked hard to get a handle on the alcohol problem, as it was dangerous and resulted in broken families. This was often done through “self-regulation” including through the internal union grievance procedure, rather than necessarily getting the employer involved.

#### Section 34:47 – 44:46

- In this section Ringrose talks about the different offices he held. He was a business agent for eighteen (18) years and president for six (6) years, though doesn’t recall exact dates. He loved being a business agent. He said Local 502 frowned upon campaigning, and he

preferred it that way, though is unsure why there was no campaign-culture when people ran for positions. He liked being a business agent better than president, because as a business agent you were not just in the office but also out on the ships. The business agent would investigate repairs needing to be done, “checking the jobs,” ensuring people were doing the job safely, sorting out grievances or other problems, dealing with the employer. He described having to engage in conflict resolution, and gives the example of having to deal with “silly things” like one “difficult” time where he had to deal with one coworker who had a hygiene problem.

#### Section 44:47 – 49:42

- In this section he talks about meeting sailors from the waterfront, including men from the Philippines and Norway. One story he relays is about how one ship crew from an Asian country lost a dog, so one coworker went to the pound to get him a new dog. When another coworker found out, he advised that the dog was “not going to live long” because the ship crew were going to eat it. He also saw chicken fighting aboard foreign ships. Ringrose says that there were tough living conditions on those ships. Sometimes the ships would be docked for as many as three weeks, so ships’ crew and longshoremen would get to know each other.

#### Section 49:43 – 53:30

- In this section Ringrose talks about his personal life, such as his family, and, including financial constraints on longshoremen, especially in the early days. One “never had to go knocking on anyone’s door” for money, but he says that money was tight, and it still is tight for new longshoremen. His wife baby-sat and took care of the kids. His kids were born in 1970 (daughter), 1973 (son), and 1975 (daughter). His son also works steady at Deltaport. Ringrose moved to North Delta in 1973.

#### Section 53:31 – 55:19

- In this section Ringrose talks about women on the waterfront, and he signed up one of the first women workers. Early problems for women included the fact that it was male-dominated, and one had to be physically and mentally tough, and people had to “take a little flack.”

#### Section 55:20 – 1:03:30

- In this section Ringrose talks about his time as president of Local 502. He got a contract signed and was there for the opening of Delta Port for which he was charged with the responsibility of ensuring that Local 502 provided training for new workers and was prepared to take on the new influx of workers. New training was for container “checkers” (data entry people, people using the computer system), bomb cart operators, gantry drivers, and wheat stackers. He discusses the issues of manning, training and equipment concerns early in when Delta Port came on stream. He suggests that BCMEA and Vancouver longshoremen didn’t want Delta Port to be under Local 502 because 502 was a “little old local” full of “river rats” who weren’t “deep sea.” He describes Delta Port as “great” for the local, and the number of members went from “the 300s” to the “the 800s,” but he suggests that the river is still very important. The Local 502 baseball team was called the “River Rats.”

#### Section 1:03:31 – 1:12:22

- In this section Ringrose talks about the Fraser River Port Authority and the Harbour Commission. Eventually Local 502 representatives went on trade missions to Asia with members of the Port Authority and the Harbour Commission. At the time, the Local wanted to clean up its image because it had a reputation for two things: first, drinking; and second, its good safety record. A lot of ships would not want to dock at work sites staffed by Local 502 because they were strict with ship safety. In this section Ringrose relays stories about meetings with international shippers, including ones from Seattle, Australia, Japan and elsewhere, who knew about New Westminster's reputation for strict safety standards. He relays stories in this section, including a story about loose lumber was particularly dangerous. Vancouver's reputation was as a good, big port. They, according to Ringrose, could not get their "crap together," whereas 502 tended to be tight and unified.

#### Section 1:12:23 – 1:22:16

- In this section Ringrose talks about three things: (1) the move of the Local 502 Hall to Surrey where most of the work was being done - he believes the move was in the "early 90s"; (2) the negotiation process as president; and (3) he mentions that Vancouver has employer dispatch, and Local 502 has a union dispatch, and that this has long been a bone of contention between the employer and the union. First, the move to Surrey involved negotiations with the Fraser River Harbour Commission, and the negotiations involved traveling time and similar issues. Recent construction of the South Fraser Perimeter Road has interrupted access to the union hall. The old hiring hall was closed without sentimentality. You used to be able to walk from PCT to the hiring hall in two minutes, but prior to the move to Surrey, highrises were going up in the downtown neighbourhood and residents were complaining about noise, so it was time to go. Second, as a president, negotiations that went well and resulted in a good contract was a particularly positive experience for Ringrose. Membership did not like one particular contract Ringrose bargained for, so that one was tough. That year, which is not identified, the membership wanted more money but also did not want to lose a half an hour of lunch, even though the lunch hour change would have resulted in more money for the members.

#### Section 1:22:17 – 1:26:52

- In this section, Ringrose talks more about his time as president, and also his dealing with the employers. The employers were "just doing their job." He got to know some of them, including Bob Wilds who was a "very hard rock" but "pretty fair." He relays one story about disagreeing with Ken Kavanagh, who threatened Ringrose with firing some 502 members. After racing into work to deal with it, Kavanagh told Ringrose "oh by the way, I agree with ya." Ringrose suggests this kind of funny relationship between him and the employer made it a good job.

#### Section 1:26:53 -- 1:33:42

- In this section he talks about the 1986 strike and the "container clause". They were offered \$10.00 per container for the pension. The "container clause" was a headache. He talks about stuffing and destuffing (filling containers or taking things out of containers), including lumber, boxes of salmon, and pulp and paper. He concludes by talking about container barges from Tacoma, and problems about the collective agreement in terms of manning container barges.