

This recording is an interview with Bob Olson, a tugboat captain who has worked on the Fraser River for 53 years. The main themes of the interview are his upbringing in Queensborough, his career trajectory as a tugboat operator, and his opinions on the changes in New Westminster.

Interviewer: Annika Arias and Michelle La

Interview date: 1 July 2014

Date Range: 1940 - Present

Recording Time: 01:58:16

Bob Olson retired as a tugboat captain after having worked for Westminster Tugboats for several decades. However, when Samson Tugs, a new company, was looking for experienced captains he returned to work and is today 71 years old. He was born on Lion Island, grew up in Queensborough, and has worked on a tugboat on the Fraser River since he was 17 years old. 54 years after he started, he states that he does pretty much the same job as when he started out, but with better equipment. He shares his experiences of multicultural Queensborough, tales about his family origins in Sweden, and his life on the Fraser River. When asked why he chose to be a tugboat operator instead of a commercial fisherman like his father, Olson replied “ I was too lazy to do the work [of a commercial fisherman], and too nervous to steal, and therefore ended up on a tugboat.”

Section 00:00 – 09:35

In this portion of the interview, Olson introduces himself and the start of his working life on the Fraser River. He started working as a deckhand on a tugboat at the age of 17, and rose in the ranks to become a captain in 1977 after having attended the Pacific Marine Training Centre. He talks about the various skills he needed to be a deckhand, the steps he needed to take to obtain his captain or master “ticket,” and the changes to the marine education throughout his time.

Section 09:36 – 11:24

In this portion on the interview, Olson talks about Westminster Tugboats, which is where he worked for the majority of his career. He worked for Russ Cooper¹, and they would dock where the River Market is today. [This dock is now used by Smit Towing]

Section 11:25 – 13:32

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about the responsibilities of a tugboat captain. In his current boat, he has one assistant, and they share responsibility for maintenance. On days with fog, he relies on electronic equipment, and Olson talks about navigation school and how he is expected to keep up with modern technology.

Section 13:33 – 20:49

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about working as a tugboat captain, and how it is very much the same as it was when he started. He is affected by weather and tidal conditions, and because the ships are now larger, his tug is larger. He talks about changes to ships and the

¹ Also interviewed for the (Re)Claiming the New Westminster Waterfront research partnership.

variety of cars that now arrive at the Annacis Island Marine Terminal. He tells how the PAD (Pacific Australian Direct) Ships would transport Buccaneer planes to Australia into the 1980s.

Section 20:50 – 24:04

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about the changes in marine regulations with regards to personal boats, and about the change in material on barges. When his grandfather was working as a steam engineer along the Fraser River, boats were made of wood. Today, Olson sees wood, steel, composite materials, fiberglass and aluminum. The major changes came after the World War II .

Section 24:05 – 28:47

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about his grandfather's emigration from Sweden. He had worked on sailing ships, and was on regular runs from Europe to North America. When the cannery and salmon industry was flourishing in British Columbia, it became obvious that there was money to be made and he moved in 1885. He worked as a steam engineer for multiple canneries and eventually became a manager of one of the canneries. His father worked at the Ewen Cannery, which was owned by the fish baron Alexander Ewen.

Section 28:48 – 37:28

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about how the traffic on the Fraser River has changed during his time. He describes the evolution from sailing ships to steam powered vessels to nuclear powered US Navy Ships. He further notes that the barges used to be 500 tonnes, and are now 10,000 tonnes, and how the business model for shipping has changed during the last 50 years. The interview switches to talk about sturgeon, before he states that his current tugboat can do the work of 6 tugboats from the period when he started working.

Section 37:29 – 43:37

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about how the river has been a place of leisure and work throughout his life. He shares how his brother and father influenced his relationship to the water. Olson tells the story of different projects he has been involved in, such as the construction of Alex Fraser and first Port Mann bridges.

Section 43:38 – 58:35

In this portion of the interview, Olson describes Queensborough during his childhood. He talks about the various nationalities that lived there and the sense of community among them. At the time, immigrants were attracted to the area for work. According to Olson, talented Norwegian and Japanese boat builders and fishermen settled in the area. The proximity to the water became a crucial source of employment through boat building, fishing and sawmills. Olson tells a story his father's cattle on Annacis Island, and the one time they had to move them back to Queensborough and one cow destroyed an adjacent Chinese garden.

Section 58:36 – 01:09:44

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about the Queensborough Bridge, and its opening in 1959 (actually 1960). Tugs and barges would hit the existing Lulu Island swing bridge and put it out of order. He moves on to talk about the Spagnol's Store, where most people in Queensborough shopped for their groceries. Olson describes the Spagnols' and their various

business ventures, and how he worked as a delivery boy for them for a time in the 1960s while going to school. He closes the section about Queensborough by talking about the Roma Hall, and the other ethnic meeting places, famous for their parties.

Section 01:09:45 – 01:15:44

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about the redevelopment of Queensborough and mainland New Westminster. He states that right now, the development leads to congestion and that industrial transportation needs to move back to the water. Olson discusses containerization, and the system of barges moving between places in BC and Washington State.

Section 01:15:45 – 01:18:01

In this portion of the interview, Olson addresses the term of “uniqueness” in planning documents for Queensborough. He states that he experienced it as unique due to ethnic diversity and highly fertile agricultural land.

Section 01:18:02 – 01:27:52

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about how Queensborough residents grew their own produce, fished in the river, and exchange goods with each other. He talks about the community, and the friends he grew up with (Allen Domaas and Erling Olsen). They have remained friends and maintained their relationship with the Fraser River and the waterfront throughout their lives.

Section 01:27:53 – 01:37:54

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about the various ships that arrived at New Westminster and Pacific Coast Terminals. He mentions important contributions by companies such as RivTow, as well as Macmillan Bloedel and the Gibson Family (lumber) to the New Westminster community. Olson describes how there are only a couple of lumber storage sites left on the Fraser River, and how you used to be able to find lumber stored along most of the river at the start of his tugboat career. Most of the lumber today is trucked directly to the mills, and the fraction that is transported on the water is by barge.

Section 01:37:55 – 01:44:49

In this portion of the interview, Olson talks about the redevelopment of New Westminster has led to short-term employment, but not sustained work, unlike the maritime industry of the past. However, he states that people are resourceful and that employment patterns change naturally. He returns to talk about his grandfather, and how BC was only 40 years old at the time of his immigration.

Section 01:44:50 – 01:58:16

In this section of the interview, Olson talks about his father who was a “rum runner” during the alcohol prohibition era in the United States. After Prohibition, he worked as a longshoreman in Vancouver for 10 years, until the strike in 1935. He did not want to break the strike, and was forced to leave the Vancouver waterfront. However, he subsequently came to the New Westminster hall as a longshoreman, after working for a logging company on Vancouver Island. Olson talks about the various mills along the Fraser River and how they all changed through international ownership. He closes the interview by telling a story about the *Alpaca*, a boat that used to be owned by employees of Al Capone, and is 100 years old.