

This recording is the first of several interviews with Dean Johnson, a retired Local 502 longshoreman and former shop steward. The major themes of this interview are his life in New Westminster, longshoremen's work, and the union.

Interviewers: Andrea Walisser; Peter Hall

Interviewee: Dean Johnson

Date of interview: 18 July 2013

Date range of topics covered: 1961 to present, though Johnson also mentions memories from his childhood growing up in New Westminster, estimated to be between c.1945-c.1961.

Sound Recording Length: 1:45:54

Johnson was born and raised in New Westminster. He discusses his early memories of life growing up in New Westminster, which he remembers fondly. He got his first longshoring work in Prince Rupert at age 16, but in 1961 when he was 17 he starting longshoring in New Westminster. In 1969 he got married. In 1974 he became a Christian. In 1975 he started a steady job at Westshore Terminals. This is Part I of several interviews that continued on July 23, 2013.

Section 00:00 – 13:31

- In this section Johnson describes New Westminster and growing up there. He describes it as a "picture postcard" city where there were only three or four apartment buildings with no more than four stories each. There used to be a five-story Roman Catholic all-boys school called St. Peter's College. He would go to the playground there to play. He said it was beautiful in the wintertime. He said there was "no crime" except he remembers one car chase. He describes the house he grew up in. He describes a big flood that happened in a year that is not given (1948?), where soldiers came to help. Johnson attended John Robson school from grade 1 to grade 5.

Section 13:32 – 15:09

- In this section, Johnson describes downtown New Westminster and says Columbia Street was very busy. He says the Eaton's store downtown was very pretty during Christmas. He describes the first time he ever ate a restaurant, the Hollywood Bowl on Carnarvon Street.

Section 15:10 – 21:40

- In this section, Johnson describes his family life when he was a child and later a teenager, and an incident where his father, who was a carpenter, was involved in a workplace accident, causing his mother to have to get a job cleaning at Royal Columbian Hospital. He also describes being a Patrol Boy at John Robson school, and other childhood activities. He was kicked out of school in grade 9. His friends' fathers were longshoremen.

Section 21:41 – 25:44

- In this section, Johnson describes when he first got a job as a longshoreman. He says he worked for one day in Prince Rupert when his sixteen, but he worked his first time in New Westminster when he was seventeen years old, on December 13, 1961. He says handling sacks (of flour) was tough because of their weight, and sometimes dragging them around would even cause the "skin would come off." Some sacks were so big that two or three men were required to lift them. The floor would be made up of the sacks themselves, so one would have to be careful so as not to break an ankle.

Section 25:45 – 31:22

- In this section, Johnson describes the “gang,” and the difficulty in getting work in some of the early years. A gang comprised of thirteen (13) members: one hatch tender, two winch drivers, two sling men, eight guys down below, four on each side, and “one of the four” was a side runner who was responsible to tell you what to do. The side runner would tell the hatch tender what to do in terms of whether or not you should stay or go. As Johnson says, “some guys couldn’t do the work, or they just wouldn’t.” One of his friends had a father who was a member, so where Johnson was getting one day a week starting off, his friend was getting two days a week.

Section 31:23 – 39:09

- In this section, he describes becoming a union member and some of the early years, including the 1969 strike. He said there was a big difference in the way you were treated once you became a member by other members, new employees, the foreman, and the employer. He remarks about the respect one was given, being described as “Mr. Johnson” instead of “Hey, kid.” To get sworn in you had to read a long oath before the Local president, and everybody shook your hand and applauded. He describes the union as being run in a very “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” way, and how, in 1969, they kicked everyone off the Local executive and elected completely new people following a strike. He remembers this as a time when Trudeau forced them to go back to work.

Section 39:10 – 48:54

- In this section, Johnson describes his move to Westshore and his experience. He says he started longshoring in 1961 and moved to Westshore in 1975. In 1974, Johnson says he became a Christian. He prayed for a job, and five months later was given a job offer at the Westshore. He had trouble getting his vacation at first, but was able to get his five weeks of vacation. Any overtime was double-time. He got a loan of some money and bought a cabin for \$4,500.00.

Section 48:55 – 53:07

- In this section, Johnson talks about getting married, and his social life as a longshoreman. He got married in 1969. He met his wife at Sloppy Joes in New Westminster, which is where young people used to go to hang out and meet each other. The Terminal Pub was a place for older longshoremen to go and hang out. He went to the Russell and the Windsor, the “King Ed,” and the Royal Towers.

Section 53:08 – 1:01:23

- In this section, Johnson describes the merger of the longshore union locals, where he lived, and his lifestyle. He talks about the dock locals and the “deep sea” workers. When the merger happened, the casuals became members right away, which caused some tension. He also speaks in this clip about some of the partying he did in his younger days. When he got married he lived on 3rd Avenue and Sixth Street, and then moved to Surrey. He says his lifestyle didn’t change when he got married, it changed when he became a Christian.

Section 1:01:24 – 1:12:05

- In this section, Johnson describes travelling back and forth between New Westminster and Surrey, the different companies, and dealing with people on the work site. He says there were different colours of paint on the equipment but it was the same work wherever you’d go:

Westshore, Empire, Canadian. Johnson talks about an encounter with a grumpy foreman. He used to work with someone that went by “Yappy,” and someone named “Len” squeezed him by the head and said “Any more of that and I’ll squeeze your head like a grape.” He does not confirm that there were any fistfights but he said someone named “Lou Laliberte” was known for sucker-punching. He mentions someone named Roger. Lou got “kicked off the beach” (which is described between 1:23:15-1:23:50 as the area where a longshoremen worked on the waterfront where the docks are) and became a bouncer.

Section 1:12:06 -- 1:17:51

- In this section, Johnson tells the story about his Norwegian cousin who owned a shipping company and who Johnson once visited in Norway. Johnson also talks about his father.

Section 1:17:52-1:23:14

- In this section, Johnson describes a workplace accident.

Section 1:23:15 – 1:30:30

- In this section, Johnson describes union politics and the reputation of Local 502 and the good and bad types of work. He says the ILWU would have nothing to do with ILA, and it bothers him that there are recent efforts to build bridges between the two because one of the reasons why Local 502 is so well-respected is that it avoided any involvement with “gangsters” in unions, or the teamsters. He says that the Local 502 has one of the best reputations for unloading ships. He says in the 1960s, the longshoremen were really safety oriented. He is proud that Local 502 stuck to its guns. He says some of the tough jobs included heavy stuff like lead. Though he describes “zinc” and “lumber” as capable of being moved “even faster” and that New Westminster’s “production” was really good.

Section 1:30:31 -- 1:40:19

- In this section, Johnson describes subjects ranging from alcohol and drugs on the waterfront to Westshore and the cultural differences between there and New Westminster. He begins by talking about how ships would go from Vancouver to New Westminster. Johnson describes one Friday night at the PCT dock where they would go down the hatch and swipe some alcohol, unbeknownst to the ship crew. In this section he talks about drinking and drugs on the job. There were few people who did drugs, but there were some. He said he managed to avoid drugs like heroin. If someone was drunk, he mentions that the drunkard would be told to go sleep it off and try to keep it from the employer. He says it was different at Westshore. The guys were older, the work was steady, and there were no bars around. He describes one coworker of his who had Alzheimer’s, but the company treated him well and allowed him to retire.

Section 1:40:20 -- 1:45:54

- In this section, Johnson says if you were a good employee, that’s your best negotiating position. He says the companies treated union employees better than even the middle management themselves who would often get fired without any notice. He talks about his experience as a shop steward.