

This recording is a follow up interview with Dean Johnson, a retired Local 502 longshoreman and former shop steward. In this interview Dean reviews and clarifies terms for the glossary of the forthcoming history book about ILWU Local 502.

Interviewer: Michelle La

Interviewee: Dean Johnson

Date of interview: October 21, 2014

Date range of topics covered: 1960s to present

Sound Recording Length: 1:10:31

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 then when he was 17 he starting longshoring in New Westminster in 1961. In 1975 he started a steady job at Westshore. In this interview Dean reviews and clarifies terms for the glossary of the forthcoming history book about ILWU Local 502 and also tells some stories.

Section 0:00:00 – 0:6:23

- In this section Dean talks about the PAD ships, grabs, mud ships and Johnson bars. He thinks it is either “Pacific Australia Direct.” He thinks that it might also allude to the names of the three ships, which began with those letters. “Grabs” are the mechanism attached to a robot or gantry crane that “grabs” material and cargo. A mud ship is a ship that carried oil concentrate, moved via conveyer belt. A “Johnson bar” was a lever that was used to manoeuvre a winch left, right, up, and down.

Section 0:06:24 – 0:10:26

- In this section, Dean talks about sling men working on scows, and the position of “boatman”. The slingmen, by the time they got enough seniority, could be steady slingmen. It was a good job on the dock. When you were on the scow, it became very dangerous and very hazardous. They only had a rope ladder (or “Jacob’s ladder”) off the side of the ship. The sling men would have to wear a Mae West (life jacket), and carry their belongings including lunch pail etc., and climb up and down the rope ladder. It was still hazardous in the summer, but in the winter, wearing rain gear, getting over the rail of the ship, was a very “clumsy” thing to have to do. It was dangerous and hard. Dean talks about the rating of boatman, steady boatman and casual boatmen.

Section 0:10:27 – 0:15:36

- In this section, Dean talks about elevator ships, car ship technology, and teamsters. Elevator ships were car ships that had elevators on them. Longshoremen would drive cars into an elevator, push the button, descend, and drive the car onto the dock. Dean talks about how nets and “grabs” were also used initially to move cars out of ships. The grabs would often bang against the cars and sometimes cause damage. Dean tells a story about a friend of his who took winch-man training on steam winches. This friend of Dean’s was bringing a car out. His friend “let go,” as Dean was pulling up, but his friend had let go so fast that the car continued on and wound up hanging sideways off the side rail of the ship. There was a body shop on the dock, and insurance would pay for any accidents. Longshoremen drive the cars to a “place of rest,” after which the teamsters come along and take the cars to put them on trains. There initially was a bit of a fight with the teamsters over this, but Dean said longshoremen didn’t care that much, despite putting up a half-hearted fight.

Section 0:15:37 – 0:23:53

- In this section, Dean defines spuds, explains the white list, and compares working at Westshore with working at other places. A spud is a long wooden cylindrical handle that came to a point, and longshoremen would put it into crevices that they didn't want damaged. A bomb cart is a machine with a trailer on the back which longshoremen drive. They can load lumber, containers, and so on. A white list is a list of people who are qualified to work at Westshore Terminals, which involves operating heavy equipment. The list gets sent over to the company, and the company determines whether or not you are acceptable for training. When you get on the white list, you are supposed to go when you get called up. Some guys like the steady work, others prefer to not go to Westshore because sometimes you can get a full shift's pay for punching in less than a full shift's hours when working at places other than Westshore. Dean also mentions that he finds it curious that people would turn down \$60.00 an hour doing heavy equipment operating but working eight hour days at Westshore, and instead would prefer to work for less money than that just so they can have more time off.

Section 0:23:54 – 0:26:10

- In this section, Dean tells the story about how the secretaries were helped out by the Westshore longshoremen. The one strike that Westshore ever had was in the late '70s or 1980s and involved the secretaries, who wanted a raise. Joe Breaks was negotiating on their behalf. The company, Dean thinks, believed that the longshoremen would cross the picket line because they were women. But the longshoremen did not. The secretaries were members of ILWU Local 517, which was the office workers local of the union.

Section 0:26:11 – 0:33:56

- In this section, Dean talks about mud sheds, dumpers, the "rubber room" where people monitor equipment and operate it remotely. Dean also talks about how you can sense when something is wrong with a machine. It might emit a different sound, or it might vibrate, and this would tell longshoremen something was wrong. Dean also talks about dumper "troubleshooters."

Section 0:33:57 – 0:37:20

- In this section, Dean continues to define terms: slip boards, tag line, and boom stick.

Section 0:37:21 – 0:43:59

- In this section, Dean talks about the strike fund and the 1935 strike. He says that the old-timers told him when he started longshoring first in 1960 which unions had a strike fund. [37:40—38:13 Dean answers a phone call]. He says longshoremen did not want to go on strike for anything trivial, it had to matter. That decision was made "before my time," he says. He recalls the conversation he had with Clair McGrath (sp?), who had been a strike breaker back in the '35 strike. He said the men who went back to work were family men, they were "starving, had no food, nobody would give them credit in town." He said this caused Dean to empathize with him. "They were pushed right to the wall," said Dean. In Dean's personal opinion, 1935 was a bad time to go on strike, but he said "I don't know what it was like." He points out that at that time in 1935 there was no "job on the side" or credit cards, if you didn't get pay from your job, you were broke, and if you couldn't pay your rent,

you were out on the streets. He never heard anyone call anyone a scab or anything derogatorily on the job or to their face, but you might hear people mention it in their absence at the beer parlour.

Section 0:44:00 – 0:46:51

- In this section, Dean talks about the merger of locals 502 and 511. He said the bigger local was 502 when 502 and 511 merged. He doesn't remember if 511 or 502 had more former strike-breakers/scabs. Some of the guys in 511 became members right away as a result of the merger. Dean points out that it just goes to show that with "the flip of a coin" you could have a good job or lose your job. Likewise, the decisions you make can affect two or three generations of your family. Dean points out that he made the decision at 17 to go longshoring at New Westminster when "I didn't know nothing," and as a result his son went longshoring, his daughter-in-law is now a longshoreman, and now even his grandson.

Section 0:46:52 – 0:53:05

- In this section, Dean talks about how he had the longest commute to work. At one point, while he was a longshoreman, he lived 120 miles northeast of Edmonton. And he worked at Westshore. He calls it his mid-life crisis: he built his own log house, a barn, and a ranch. He would drive 2.5 hours to Edmonton, then fly 1.5 hours to Vancouver, then drive to Westshore. He would work 5-day shifts. He would stay with his mother and father for five days, and then fly back. He did that five years. At the time he was able to get return trip tickets to Edmonton and back for \$100.00, and often bought a year's worth of tickets in advance. Dean also said that he knew longshoremen in the Lower Mainland who lived in places such as Peachland and elsewhere in the interior, and commuted back and forth. They would live in a camper for five days in the parking lot of the union hall. He says currently there is a man who goes back and forth between Thailand and Canada.

Section 0:53:06 – 0:59:05

- In this section, Dean talks about alcohol on the waterfront. When asked if drinking was bad in the 80s, he said it was, but it was worse in the 60s. He joked, "If you remember the '60s, you weren't there." In the '70s, alcohol use among longshoremen was bad and that's when they thought they had to start "clamping down" on drinking, but the '60s was worse Dean said because then there was no thought of "clamping down" whatsoever. If you didn't have a bottle, sometimes the foreman supplied the bottle. They made a run every day, when the liquor store opened at 10am. If you didn't have money to chip in, someone else would. He stresses that this all depended on individual gangs. Gangs of single guys had a completely different perspective; gangs of family men might not have drunk at all, or as much. Dean notes that "Westshore cured a lot of drunks, and I was one of 'em." Westshore had full day shifts and heavy equipment.

Section 0:59:06 – 1:03:59

- In this section, Dean talks about familial connections among longshoremen. Members' sons got preferential treatment. There had been a "members' board." They don't have that anymore. It stopped in the '80s he thinks. He went to Westshore in 1975, so a lot of the changes that happened in BCMEA he doesn't know. He has heard of families where everyone is a longshoreman. He talked about how there is an extended family that has over forty people in ILWU.

Section 1:04:00 – 1:10:31

- In this section, Dean talks about Deltaport and women on the waterfront. He said he has worked there, and done all kinds of jobs there. He said the size of Local 502 will double when the new terminal is built. He said there are not a lot of women. He asked his wife if she was interested, but she is a nurse and prefers to stick with that. He also winds up the interview by talking about union history.