

This recording is from an interview with Hank Hoolsema, a current longshoreman who has worked at most docks in Vancouver and along the Fraser River. The main themes of the interview are his start in longshoring, changes to the occupation, and description of the various docks he worked on and cargo he has loaded.

Interviewer: Dean Johnson
Interview Date: 3 March 2014
Date range: 1960s - present
Recording time: 01:07:09

Hank Hoolsema is an experienced longshoreman, who grew up on a farm in Langley with 15 siblings. His extended family includes 20 longshoremen, including his father. His first longshore job was to pull logs from log booms onto a pallet in 1963, and he has remained on the waterfront every since. Hoolsema never attended school, but his father taught him manual labour on the farm, which Hoolsema credits for allowing him to succeed in the physically demanding longshoring industry. Despite not having any formal education, he was able to increase his ratings through earning multiple journeyman “tickets,” including switchman and engineering tickets. Today, Hoolsema is 67 years old, and still receives calls from the hall about work because of his qualification as a motor engineer. He states that he appreciates that he has the chance to continue to work, as he is not ready to retire.

The companies that Hoolsema mentions that he has worked for are Pacific Coast Terminals (PCT) New Westminster, Overseas Terminals, Fraser Surrey Docks, Brackman & Ker Terminals, Canadian Stevedoring, Empire Stevedoring, Canadian Wharfs, and PCT in Port Moody.

Section 00:00 – 04:27

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema describes the start of his longshoring career, and tells the story of his first day of work in 1963 at age 16. He had no previous experience, except the work he had done on his father’s farm. He eventually became a heavy-duty mechanic, and has worked at most docks in Vancouver and along the Fraser River.

Section 04:28 – 07:46

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about the changes in longshoring work. When he started in the 1960s, the work was physically demanding, but he operated a forklift and other mechanical tools relatively soon, so by the time he was 22 he was assigned a mechanic’s job on the waterfront. He states that there was no such thing as a typical day, and shares how they would unload 15 railcars of metal ore before lunch. He normally worked from 8 to 5, and remembers the dock as busy and large.

Section 07:47 – 10:37

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about PCT during the 1960s. It had four berths, a cold storage plant, a coffee shop, and the dispatch. The dispatcher at the time was Harry Smith who would always wear a cowboy hat. Hoolsema again notes the similarities between farm work and longshoring, stating that moving hay and driving tractors was no different from moving sacks of sand and operating a forklift.

Section 10:38 – 14:41

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema states that he became a longshoreman because of the benefits. He describes seeing an advertisement for teachers, and realizing he made more money than someone who had gone to school. Hoolsema did receive special training, and got his switchman ticket from Vancouver Wharfs in North Vancouver after completing 2000 hours of training and a provincial exam. The same was true for his engineer's ticket, and he transitioned to heavy-duty mechanic. He closes the section by stating that there was no protective gear such as steel-toed boots or ear protection when he started.

Section 14:42 – 23:43

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about the cargo that was handled at PCT, including lumber, plywood, pulp, apples (in the fall), lead, and zinc (both bars and ore). He explains how loose lumber was loaded by hand, how to cover the hatch by hand, how apples came in on railcars and were boxed in the cold storage before loaded, and how they unloaded the first ship of Datsun cars by winch and hook in the 1960s. He closes the section by talking about the rail system and the rail accidents at PCT, and how he was mesmerized by the Royal Hudson steam locomotive.

Section 23:44 – 30:28

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about the Brackman & Ker dock, and Overseas Terminals. Both of these docks were mostly plywood docks and were less busy. He describes the fun and the laughter on the docks with the "old-timers", and tells a story about Curly Smith and a number of other longshoremen he remembers. Hoolsema talks about how they could load 2400 bags of fertilizer, weighing 120 pounds each, before 9:30 AM if they had a good crew and a forklift operator.

Section 30:29 – 37:03

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about the Pacific Australia Direct ships, which were roll-on, roll-off cargo ships that would be loaded with lumber at Fraser Surrey Docks. At the time, these docks were called Johnson Terminals and it still had a grain elevator. Hoolsema explains how they unloaded sawdust from railcars using a front-end loader and then loaded it onto the ship with a "blower" and the help of airflow at Fraser Surrey Docks. There is a brief mention of Annacis Marine Terminals and the work Hoolsema did at the Rice Mills Terminal in Richmond.

Section 37:04 – 38:32

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema describes the coffee shop at PCT, which could hold up to 70 people and "was a beehive of activity."

Section 38:33 – 41:52

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about being a member of the union (ILWU), and how it was like a family and brotherhood. The two men talk about "backdoor bandits," who were

dockworkers who were automatically made members of the 502 ILWU Local when 502 and 511 were amalgamated.¹ He talks about the job of union members.

Section 41: 53 – 45:39

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about changes in technology. He started out in the time of steam winches and trains, and now works at the container terminal at Deltaport, which he refers to as Westshore. He states that technology has allowed faster troubleshooting, and only affected him in a good way, as work became physically easier. He regards these changes as “cost-effective,” favourably comparing the transition from a 13-man gang to one person on a forklift or a crane.

Section 45:40 – 47:24

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema returns to talk about the union (ILWU 502) and how it affected his working conditions. If he had an issue, he would call the union for help, and he participated in strikes. He describes being on strike, and how he could be confident that the strike would end because the economy was dependent on the port and the longshoremen.

Section 47:25 – 49:59

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about the dangers involved in longshoring, and how it is not dangerous if you do not know what to do. He explains that he was told at an early point that “he was in the bite,” (a dangerous location) which taught him about the right places to stand and walk on the dock. He states that the employer was fair in most cases, and that his worst job was working with animal hides. His favourite job is to operate the cranes at Deltaport.

Section 50:00 – 57:23

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema talks about how his job affected his life, and states that it was only positive because it gave him freedom and a network. He further compares working out of the longshore hall in New Westminster to that of being a permanent employee at Deltaport. He states that he would recommend longshoring to younger people, and did for his girlfriend’s son who is now waitlisted as a journeyman multiple places. Hoolsema was hurt on the job only once, when a bar of lead fell on his toe. He was off work for one week. He closes the section by talking about how there were no women in longshore until about 10 years ago.

Section 57:24 – 01:07:09

In this portion of the interview, Hoolsema explains a day as a longshoreman at PCT in the 1960s. It would start at the longshore hall around 7AM, where he would turn his “plate,” wait for the “board of jobs” to be put up, hope for a forklift job, and go for breakfast before starting his assigned job. He married at 19, and at that time stopped working at the farm. He ends the interview by talking about how people would drink at bars during lunch and return drunk to the job, and the different personalities on the waterfront.

¹ [The](#) 2 locals amalgamated in 1966. Local 511 was originally the “Westminster Warehousemen” local.