

This interview is of Les Gunderson a retired master boat builder from Sather Boat Works and resident of Queensborough. The major themes discussed in this interview are Queensborough, boat building, and fishing.

Interviewers: Annika Airas and Pamela Stern

Interview Date: 18 February 2014

Date Range: 1930s - 2014

Sound Recording Length: 01:42:03

Les Gunderson is a retired wooden boat builder who worked at Sather Boat Works in Queensborough, and is currently a boat building history instructor for Quadrant Marine Institute on Granville Island. Gunderson's grandfather immigrated from Norway in 1904 to Idaho, then migrated to British Columbia where he became a commercial fisherman. His grandfather and father were both shipwrights and fishermen. While still in high school (1953/54), Gunderson started working with his father at Sather as a cleanup boy on Saturdays. After he graduated high school he was also working on tugboats. He was asked to decide between the two occupations, and chose to work at Sather. He started as an apprenticeship shipwright at Sather in 1959, and worked there for 37 years. Sather was in competition with the 35 other shipyards located on the Fraser River between Steveston to Mission. At Sather, Gunderson helped build 120 wooden commercial fishing boats. Sather was the last shipyard building wooden boats; the last boat was built in 1989. In 1996 following a heart attack, Gunderson decided to retire.

Section 0:00 – 5:50

- In this section of the interview Gunderson discusses the history of Sather Boat Works and how he started working for the company. The shipyard's first location was on Annacis Island and was originally built and operated by naturalist David Suzuki's uncles. The shipyard was dismantled in 1938/39 because of the lack of utility services on Annacis Island, and the Suzukis moved to its current location at the foot of Jardine St. The Suzukis repaired boats until they were interned during World War II. For a while BC Packers owned the yard, then it was owned by Conrad Stockton who operated Stockton Boat Works at the site, and then in 1950 Mel Sather bought the boatyard and hired Gunderson's father as foreman. Sather was a halibut fisherman not a shipwright, but took care of the administrative duties for the shipyard.

Section 5:51 – 15:02

- In this section of the interview Gunderson describes the work at Sather. Gunderson states that despite not being paid the best wage at Sather he enjoyed the work because it was challenging. He describes the process of preparing the lumber for the boats. At Sather they built their own boat models, lofted them out, and built the whole boat from beginning to end. After each boat launching party the crew would start all over again. The range of boats they built at Sather were between 32 ft. to 70 ft. Gunderson

also mentions that he is a boatbuilding instructor at Quadra Marine Institute, where he teaches students about the history of wooden boat building.

Section 15:03 – 21:43

- In this section of the interview Gunderson describes his experiences growing up in Queensborough, his fishing adventures as a youth, and what it was like working at Sather. He recalls that Queensborough was largely populated by immigrants, where many of the residents worked in the towboat and sawmill industry in the community. The sawmill industry, in particular, paid a good wage even if the workers did not speak English. He believes that at his elementary school all of the students represented 28-30 different nationalities, the majority being European. At Sather the crew worked year round and never had heat in the building. In winter, the river underneath the shipyard would be frozen and the men would be standing on ice nailing the planks into the boat. Gunderson believes that Queensborough suited the lifestyle that he wanted to live, and describes himself as being a Tom Sawyer/Huckleberry Finn type of guy. During the fishing seasons, after school he and his friends would go out fishing until midnight, and sold his fish to the canneries along the waterfront or to fish collectors.

Section 21:44 – 29:59

- In this section of the interview Gunderson describes fishing as a youth, and his childhood in Queensborough. He recalls that the Department of Fisheries confiscated his fishing net because it was too short and believes this was because the commercial fishermen were upset that the kids in Queensborough were catching the fish before they were able to them. He recalls that the whole perimeter of Queensborough was Chinese gardens and every block had a different vegetable garden. He remembers that every weekend there were different cultural banquets and that Queensborough residents attended all the ethnic events.. He describes industries in Queensborough in the 1950s and 60s, and his brief experience working as a deckhand on a tugboat.

Section 30:00 – 37:36

- In this section of the interview Gunderson discusses how he briefly salvaged logs in the Fraser River during freshet, and describes in further detail about what it was like growing up in Queensborough. There was only one elementary school in the community, and kids would take the bus to go to high school, which was located on the main part of New Westminster. According to him, Queensborough students were not bullied in high school because they had strength in numbers. The students from the main part of New Westminster looked down on the Queensborough students, and uptown parents did not let their kids go down to Queensborough. He as attributes recent residential development in Queensborough to construction of a modern sewage system.

Section 37:37 – 48:42

- In this section of the interview Gunderson discusses the changes that have occurred in Queensborough. He remembers how his mother would curse, whenever she would hang her laundry outside, because the ash from the beehive burners got on the clean clothes. He recalls that fishermen in Queensborough were squatters, as nobody owned the land. In 1930, Gunderson's father came back with \$1000 from a fishing trip and built a house in Queensborough, and paid \$85 for the lot of land. The houses on Queensborough were owner built and the homes often slowly, over time without going into debt.

Section 48:42 – 1:07:41

- In this section of the interview Gunderson describes the house he lived in, growing up. He reports that cedar was used as the foundation for homes, and discusses the changes in building code. He recalls that Russian, Ukrainian, and Slovakian residents in particular were great gardeners, who lived on what they produced, and states that every house in the community had a chicken coop. There was also a family who had cows. The active gardeners were of the generation of Gunderson's parents, and when they got too old the large gardens in Queensborough disappeared.

Section 1:07:42 – 1:14:35

- In this section of the interview Gunderson discusses the boat-building history course he teaches at the Quadra Marine Institute, and the types of students he has. His class is a part of a 4-year marine apprenticeship program, funded by the government, the student's employers, and the student.

Section 1:14:26 – 1:23:53

- In this section of the interview Gunderson discusses women in the boat building industry, and his view of the Queensborough 2040 Community Plan. At Sather he did not work with any women, but has more recently, and that the females he has worked with have been capable boat builders. He is generally positive about Queensborough Community Plan, however, he does not think that the changes will come quickly. In this section he also lists some of the species wildlife that live in Queensborough, including coyotes, mallard ducks, and blue herons.

Section 1:23:54 – 1:42:02

- In this section of the interview Gunderson returns to his childhood Queensborough, the changes the community has gone through, and his family. He states that you were not a Queensborough person until you fell in a ditch and became covered in slime, which was a weekly occurrence for him. He believes that Queensborough was once a thorn in the side of New Westminster and reports that the neighbourhood considered joining Richmond because the City of New Westminster was not giving Queensborough any services. At the end of the interview, Gunderson states with pride that Sather was the last boatyard to build wooden boats.