

This recording is an interview with Brian Debeck, a man who has worked in various industries on and off the waterfront in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia and was the representative for the Retail and Warehouse Union BC. The major themes in the interview are his time at Canada Rice Mills, changes within the retail and warehouse markets connected to unions, and the affiliation of the Retail and Warehouse Union with the longshoremen's association.

Interviewer: Peter Hall and Ken Bauder

Interview date: 6 April 2013

Date Range: 1960s – 2000s

Sound Recording Length: 1:52:29

Brian Debeck worked on and off the water in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia since the 1960s. His work experiences involve mills, fisheries, ships, warehouses and docks and he ultimately became the union representative of the Retail and Warehouse Union in BC. He tells stories from his first work at the Canada Rice Mill in Richmond to his time as a union representative at the international convention in Miami. The BC union eventually broke away from the international union and formed separately in BC. Debeck discusses the changes to the transportation sector in BC, and links various historical changes to changes he has observed in his work. Companies mentioned in the interview are Burrard Trucking, Burlington Northern Railway, Safeway, Labatt Breweries and Georgia Straight.

This interview contains coarse language.

Section 0:00 – 10:45

In this portion of the interview, Debeck opens the interview by talking about growing up in Kamloops, and coming to Vancouver to attend University of British Columbia in 1965. Through an acquaintance he was hired to work at the Canada Rice Mill located next to Queen Charlotte Fisheries on the south arm of the Fraser River. He worked there for three years, and describes the area of the mill and the activities there.

Section 10:46 – 26:21

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about his time at the Rice Mill. He talks about how there were many women who worked at both the fishery and at the mill, and the women at the mill worked fulltime in packaging. The mill also processed other food products that were redistributed to the Canadian commercial market or to the United States by Burlington Northern rail. The various tasks in the mill are described.

Section 26:22 – 36:30

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about the constant change in crew, but the continuing community on the river. He talks about car ships that arrived from Japan and the gruesome job of packing soap. At its peak, the mill employed 80 people, paid women significantly less than men and had no immigrant workers. In the last part of this section, Debeck returns to a discussion of the acquaintance who got him the job at the rice mill.

Section 36:31 – 43:53

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about the multiple places he worked between the time he quit at the rice mill and up until he became the representative for the Retail Wholesale Union. The places included among others Georgia Strait newspaper, a short fishing career, Safeway Distribution in Burnaby and ended up getting a shipping clerk job right before a strike in 1976, and when he was sent back to the dispatch hall for the union he decided to take the representative job in 1979.

Section 43:54 – 51:24

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about the breath of the retail wholesale collective agreement and its overlap with the machine hardware sector. He discusses the industrial area of False Creek and his adventures during a summer job at Labatt Brewery in New Westminster in the summer of 1968.

Section 51: 25 – 1:00:37

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about technology's effect on work opportunities. He discusses the largest changes in the warehouse industry during the 1980s and various companies in the supply chain for the food retail market, such as Safeway.

Section 1:00:38 – 1:19:24

In this portion of the interview, Debeck discusses the process of transloading to designated warehouses, work which used to be done by longshoremen. He discusses how the introduction of corporate contracts changed unions and therefore collective agreements in the retail sector. Ultimately, the changes affected wages and working conditions for the now larger pool of temporary workers in the retail sector.

Section 1:19:25 – 1:33:17

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about the changes in the transportation industry from the late 1970s to the 1990s in terms of union involvement and trade. Conversation touches on the container clause of the longshoreman contract introduced in 1986, increased competition from Edmonton and Calgary and the introduction of the third party warehousing. He talks about how the union was probably at its strongest in the 1970, and describes the very beneficial contracts that some of the workers held.

Section 1:33:18 – 1:52:29

In this portion of the interview, Debeck talks about the affiliation of the Retail and Warehouse Union with the longshoremen. The Retail and Warehouses Union in BC was affiliated with an international union until 1981, and he talks about conventions in Miami with excess alcohol and food, before they broke away and started a purely Canadian union. He talks about the uniqueness of the longshoremen's agreement, and states that when they needed to be affiliated with another Canadian union to be recognized by BC Federation of Labour, they chose to be affiliated with the ILWU. Debeck describes how the Retail and Warehouse Union has benefitted from this affiliation, but stresses the difference between the workers within the two unions in terms of labour mobility.