

This recording is an interview with Russ Cooper, a retired tugboat captain who, beginning in the late 1950s, worked for multiple tugboat companies as well as for his family's company, Westminster Tugboats. The main themes of the interview are Cooper's history as a tugboat operator, the evolution of Westminster Tugboats, and the changing nature of industry on the water throughout his time.

Interviewer: Mark McKenzie
Interview date: 27 September 2013
Date Range: 1950s – 2013
Sound Recording Length: 1:03:27

Russ Cooper is a retired tugboat captain who worked on the waterfront for over 40 years. His family started and ran Westminster Tugboats, and he knew early that he wanted to work on the water. He tells the story of how his grade 1 workbook asked the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and how he knew that the answer was "tugboat captain." He shares his story of being a tugboat captain, and the various changes to the fleet of his company in the face of an evolving industry. He discusses the volatile business environment among the competitors on the water, and the various companies that made and make up the industry throughout his time. In his career he worked for Marpole Towing, Gilley Brothers, Western Tug and Barge and Vancouver Tug before he returned to Westminster Tugs for the remainder of his career.

Section 00:00 – 13:04

In this portion of the interview, Cooper talks about the start and height of Westminster Tugboats and his own history within the industry. His grandfather (Tom Cooper) arrived to New Westminster from the Orkney Islands in 1904 and started Westminster Tugboats in 1919 and passed it along to his son (Art Cooper), who later passed it on to Russ. Westminster Tugboats was at its height during WWII with eleven boats, and this was also at the time when the company switched from steam to diesel engines. Describes the way boat builders got around wartime restrictions on building new boats. Russ received his tugboat license (the "ticket") at age 26 (1966) and returned to the family company the following year. He remained with the company until he retired in 2002. With shift from steam to diesel ships, tugboats became required to assist with docking, before this most tug work was towing. Describes technical details of various tugboat engines, and transition to steel tugboats.

Section 13:05 – 20:11

Cooper describes his daily routine, and the long hours of work. This often meant working throughout the night, and battling fog exacerbated by sawmill operations. He discusses how the operations of the company changed when they started using radar and radio in the early 1960s, and the techniques of listening to whistle echo his father and grandfather learnt in navigation school.

Section 20:12 – 37:14

In this portion of the interview, Cooper describes the evolution of Westminster Tugboats as well as that of the boats used by the tugboat companies. Cooper's father sold his shares of Westminster Tugboats to RivTow in 1976, but Cooper remained with the company. He describes

how the various ship owners and agents drove the developments of new boats, larger motors and new equipment.

Section 37:15 – 47:05

In the portion of the interview, Cooper talks about how Smit bought RivTow in 2000 as they wanted the ship docking component, and the developments within the tug industry along the West Coast in the 21st century. He mentions companies such as Amix, Ledcor and Seaspan, as well as the forestry industry's involvement. Cooper talks about the industry in the last 100 years, noting that companies come and go, but Westminster Tugboats survived because they focused on a niche market.

Section 47:06 – 50:14

Cooper discusses the financial situation and struggles of a tugboat captain. Gilley Brothers paid him \$192 per month in the 1960s, and when he worked for his father, his base salary was \$500. He closes this section by talking about how the men who worked in the tugboat industry were tough men and how many of them had been around for a long time.

Section 50:15 – 52:50

In this portion of the interview, the captain talks about how Marpole Towing hired him two days after he graduated from high school, and how he later moved on to Gilley Brothers. His father and grandfather had good connections with Gilley Brothers, and he states that his name helped him with opportunities in the industry, but he also had developed good experience working for his dad during high school.

Section 52:51 – 56:11

In this portion of the interview, Cooper talks about a period in the early 1960s when there was a conflict between Seafarers International Union and the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway and Transport Workers. Describes SIU as "thugs." In his career, this was the only union conflict he experienced, and he was only laid off once (while at Gilley Brothers), and sustained through recessions with Westminster Tugs.

Section 56:12 – 1:03:27

In this portion of the interview, Cooper talks about the changing New Westminster waterfront. He tells the story of John, a manager of RivTow, who in the 1970s predicted that within his lifetime there would be no sawmills left on the north arm of the Fraser. Cooper closes by describing how the amenities needed for marine business on the water is slowly closing down, such as the Shell fuel station and various shipyards, making it hard to sustain the industry.