

This interview is of Frank Cobbaert, a retired ILWU Local 502 and 514 longshoreman, who worked at the all of the terminals along the New Westminster and Surrey waterfronts and Roberts Bank. The key themes in this interview are mechanization, changes in workplace safety, alcohol, Roberts Bank, being a foreman, union grievances, strikes, cargo handling, and unionism.

Interviewer: Dean Johnson

Date: 1 May 2014

Date Range: 1960s – 2009

Sound Recording Length: 01:58:56

Frank Cobbaert is a retired International Longshoremen Warehousemen Union (ILWU) Local 502 and 514 longshoreman. He worked as a longshoreman from the age of nineteen in January 1968, and retired at the age of sixty-one in November 2009, making his longshore career just short of forty-two years. It took him six and a half years to gain membership into the union. He worked along the waterfronts of New Westminster and Surrey until November of 1988, when he joined Local 514 and took a foreman job at Roberts Bank, which he kept until his retirement. Prior to 1988, he fulfilled various positions for Local 502, as an executive, assistant business agent, dispatcher, and picket captain. Throughout this interview, Cobbaert often mentions the effects mechanization had on longshoring, changes in work attitudes and safety, “toughing out” the hard times when longshore work was slack, and the camaraderie amongst longshoremen. Cobbaert frequently expresses his gratitude and thankfulness for the experiences and friendships he gained as a longshoreman.

Section 0:00 – 16:05

In this section of the interview Cobbaert describes how he was introduced to longshoring by a friend who was a member of Local 502, the process of being dispatched to jobs, and the experience of his first jobs, loading boxes of apples and hand stowing lumber onto a ship. The more jobs he worked, the more he realized that he wanted to continue working as a longshoreman. He felt that if he persisted to become a member of the union, he would have the employment benefits and as well as the freedoms that longshoremen had to make their own schedules. He also describes the different jobs he did, ways to handle cargo, and the machinery and tools used.

Section 16:06 – 26:40

In this section of the interview Cobbaert describes working on car ships, how to gain seniority, how he made good friends on the waterfront, the work gang structure, and his experience working at Roberts Bank as a foreman. The job that Cobbaert disliked the most was handling nickel matte because his fingers would bleed from handling the big sharp rocks. He made many of his closest friends when he was a young longshoreman. Cobbaert claims that the best job title he ever had was “assistant banana inspector.” During the early 1970s there was a longshore strike in the United States and some cargoes, such as bananas, were sent to the New Westminster waterfront. He assisted the banana inspector by bringing the bananas to the inspector.

Section 26:41 – 37:20

In this section of the interview Cobbaert discusses the changes on the waterfront, changing attitudes towards work safety, how every ship that docked was different, describes the gang structure, and how automation affected the longshoring. Cobbaert also tells a story about a longshoreman who stole a car from a car ship. The longshoreman wanted to have a drink at a beer parlour in New Westminster. When the car ran out of gas on the Pattullo Bridge, a policeman came and never noticed the car was unregistered, and he helped the longshoreman get the car off the bridge. He and the interviewer, Dean Johnson, express how grateful they feel to have worked as longshoremen, the loyal bond they had with other longshoremen, and that saw them through crises such as death and divorce.

Section 37:21 – 48:11

In this section of the interview Cobbaert discusses the “hard times,” when work was slack, strikes, camaraderie amongst longshoremen, and working at Roberts Bank. It took Cobbaert six and a half years to move from being a casual into the union. Cobbaert remarks that when he first started working Local 502 only had approximately 300 members, now it has more than 700. Today, he believes longshoremen would not be able to get to know other as well as they did when the local was much smaller. He attributes the increased membership to automation, which requires people to maintain and keep the machines running. He discusses how working at Roberts Bank is considered desirable because of the stable work schedule. When he first started working, a longshoreman would need twenty-five years of seniority to work there, now he believes it is twenty years, as many people are retiring.

Section 48:12 – 1:04:13

In this section of the interview Cobbaert describes some of the ways longshoremen would relax after work, his experience as an assistant business agent for the union, and how the union disciplined its members through the grievance committee. He remembers that when he was younger, the longshoremen would go to the bar at the Windsor Hotel to buy five beers for a dollar, and everyone would put down a dollar or more. He recalls that when he was a business agent, he had to talk to foremen who were upset about longshoremen drinking on the job, and how he would always insist to the foremen and superintendent that they would rather discipline the workers themselves.

Section 1:04:14 – 1:13:11

In this section of the interview Cobbaert discusses the significance of the union, his role as a picket captain, strikes during the 1960s and 70s, and the union’s contribution to charities. Cobbaert believes that ILWU is one of the strongest unions in Canada and without it longshoremen would not be receiving the high wages and pensions, and job training they do today. He describes that when Local 502 was on strike at, they held four hour picket shifts at Fraser Surrey Docks and Pacific Coast Terminals (PCT). As picket captain he was responsible for managing shifts, and checking who showed up. He mentioned that some longshoremen due to religious reasons would not do picket duty, instead of picketing these

longshoremen “paid to the hall.” Cobbaert states that in the 60s and 70s the companies liked to drag out contract negotiations with the union, and that almost every contract would go to arbitration. He mentions that Local 502 and 514 usually gave money to the Children’s Hospital and to local community charities.

Section 1:13:12 – 1:22:33

In this section of the interview Cobbaert discusses how he feels fortunate to have a great longshore career, especially when comparing wages and pensions to other jobs, and he also discusses how families of longshoremen would socialize. He notes that during his longshore career there were no female longshoremen, but today there are increasingly more female longshoremen, and they work at Westshore Terminals. When he worked, the only female worker on site was the “first aid lady,” and he claims that nobody harassed her. He recommends longshoring as a career, but recognizes that it is a difficult industry to get into.

Section 1:22:34 – 1:37:23

In this section of the interview Cobbaert describes the changes that the New Westminster waterfront has gone through, he also talks about the importance to the Fraser River to New Westminster. He discusses the decline lumber milling during the 1970s. Cobbaert also talks about living in New Westminster when the work was at PCT, but when worked moved to the other side of the river, he moved to Delta. He believes that many of the longshoremen also made the same move because “nobody wanted to fight the [Pattullo] bridge for the hall.” In this section he also describes how he handled certain cargos.

Section 1:37:24 – 1:48:31

In this section of the interview Cobbaert tells stories. He recalls a time when there were Local 502 drunk longshoremen who were so inebriated that the driver of the bus, who transports Local 502 workers from Vancouver, would not let them on. The longshoremen consequently got suspended by the employer and BCMEA and never worked on the waterfront again. He tells another story about a longshoreman who stole a Seiko watch from a seaman, who was selling it for five dollars. This resulted in the seaman threatening the longshoreman with a knife, and the longshoreman chased the seaman back with a piece of lumber. Cobbaert also remembers a few fights and parties on the waterfront, and heavy drinking when ships carrying alcohol came to the port.

Section 1:48:32– 1:58:57

In this section Cobbaert discusses mechanization, and how he believes that Vancouver wanted to steal Local 502’s jurisdiction when they heard about containers coming to Roberts Bank (Delta Port). He and Dean Johnson discuss how New Westminster was never parking friendly for its workers; they remember that parking at Overseas Transports was particularly awful. They discuss how the longshoremen brought a lot of business to New Westminster, especially because longshoremen were always patrons to its restaurants and beer parlours.