

This recording is with Geoff Clayton, who was an apprentice machinist with Webb & Gifford Ltd. in the 1950s. His wife Aline is also present. The major topics discussed are job duties, machinist training; workplace safety, environmental damage; conflicts and comradeship in the workplace.

Interviewer: Andrea Walisser & Rob McCullough

Date: 27 June 2013

Date range: 1952-1958, limited mentions of earlier and later periods

Sound Recording Length: 1:57:09

Born in 1935, Geoff Clayton completed a five-year apprenticeship as a machinist at Webb & Gifford Ltd.. As part of this training, he took classes at Vancouver Vocational School and spent time blacksmithing. After he left Webb & Gifford, Clayton returned to school for marine engineering and power engineering, working on a few ships before settling into a 25-year career with BC Hydro. Clayton considers himself an environmentalist and discusses the environmental damage to the Fraser River he witnessed during his time with Webb & Gifford. He also discusses zoot suiters, hobos, and religious holy rollers in New Westminster and Port Coquitlam in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.

0:00-5:16

- Clayton discusses his first employment in New Westminster with Imperial Optical in 1952; during his lunch hours he would walk to the waterfront and watch fish being landed at BC Packers. Mentions his concern with environmental damage to the river from industrial activity, specifically Webb & Gifford had hatches in floors and the waste products from the machining, and human sewage were dumped into the river.

5:17-9:10

- Clayton describes his first waterfront job at Webb & Gifford, which involved maintenance to the Pattullo Bridge, done without traffic controls. Describes the location of other industrial sites near Webb & Gifford including Swiftshore Tugboats and Augustine Coal. According to Clayton, the Overseas Transport dock was constructed at this time through the efforts of local business leaders including Gifford.

9:11-18:15

- In this section Clayton describes his training as an apprentice machinist; details his uniform (a pair of coveralls), starting duties (cleaning machinery to be repaired), starting wage (\$0.50/hr). It was a financial strain to travel to work from Port Coquitlam. Discusses injuries he and the other apprentices suffered. Describes job as interesting, demanding, and dangerous. Clayton explains the process required to harden steel and one particular occasion when he sustained burns after causing an explosion of liquid cyanide. The blacksmith saved his life.

18:16-22:28

- Clayton explains the uses for hardened steel including metal shingles, some of which he says can be found on New Westminster homes. He was also involved in machining parts of aircraft engines for Bristol Aeroengines in Seattle, which he describes in detail. According to Clayton, Webb & Gifford had him doing this job even though he did yet have the required journeyman's papers.

22:29-29:30

- Discusses the history of Webb & Gifford as a blacksmithing and welding operation. Describes some of the work of Heaps Engineering (on Lulu Island) and Webb & Gifford toward the war effort. Explains distinction between machine operators and machinists. Webb & Gifford also did ship retrofits after the war and other ship repairs.

29:31-38:53

- According to Clayton, after the war New Westminster was trying to develop as an international ports. Large ships, including retrofitted Liberty ships called at New Westminster as tramp steamers. Describes the way that longshoremen loaded lumber by hand. Discusses safety inspections of the lifting gear on ships. Clayton states that Canadian ship inspectors found safety inspections done in Asia were forged and states that ILWU insisted on improved safety. This provided business for Webb & Gifford to repair and strengthen the port hatches and lifting equipment. Sometimes Clayton worked 24 hours straight or more to get these repairs done. According to Clayton "flags of convenience" enabled corruption and resulted in dangerous conditions.

38:54-45:53

- This section contains several anecdotes about interactions with foreign sailors; describes a Cuban ship crewed by armed naval personnel. Claims most foreign freighters calling at New Westminster were in poor repair. Describes a Japanese ship that the crew was trying to complete tying down the deck load of lumber in order to make the tide.<sup>1</sup> Mentions drinking with Swedish or Norwegian sailors.

45:54-56:36

- Describes doing repairs to machinery at the tannery, notes the horrible smell of hides. Also worked at the printing plant of the Columbian newspaper, and at many other types of businesses. According to Clayton, Webb and Gifford attempted to adapt to industry changes, but were unable to compete with American machine shops and went into receivership. Other small local

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<sup>1</sup> It is unlikely that the ship's crew was tying down the load as this would have been a longshore activity.

machine shops (Durant Machine Works and Westminster Boiler and Tank) also went out of business. Small sawmills built in house machine shops, which further threatened the economic climate for small machine shops. Clayton blames China for current threats to Canadian manufacturing.

56:37 – 1:00:59

- Discusses New Westminster's success as an international port. Describes whistle tune of the SS Sealion (a tugboat) and the composition of its crew. Mentions his own unsuccessful effort to get hired as marine engineer on the Samson V and on a whaling ship.

1:01:00-1:05:02

- Describes handling of lead at Pacific Coast Terminals and his role in annealing chains for this.

1:05:03-1:14:36

- Relationship between apprentices and journeymen. Clayton describes a fight he had with a blacksmith at Webb & Gifford. Describes distinction between the work of blacksmiths, welders, and machinists.

1:14:37-1:17:40

- Clayton details his machinist apprenticeship – five years, including one year at a blacksmith's shop and night classes at Vancouver Vocational School (now Vancouver Community College).

1:17:41-1:21:33

- Discusses socializing with co-workers, trading his car for a motorcycle. Clayton reports that he began racing motorcycles and won the Canadian National championship in 1956.

1:21:34-1:36:08

- Clayton reflects on the results of his time with Webb & Gifford, including his current involvement with the environmental movement. He states that apprenticeships did not generally lead to employment even after earning journeyman's papers. Clayton then studied to become a marine engineer, and was hired by CPR Western Canadian steamship division on the Princess Patricia and spent some time at sea; then returned in the 1960s. He then went back to VCC for power engineering, and worked 25 years for BC Hydro. Reflects on the aspects of various jobs he liked, and the exploitation of apprentices at Webb & Gifford. Describes encounters with Jim Gifford. Describes making a "rabbit" which is personal work done on work time, with work equipment and materials.

1:36:09-1:38:40

- Clayton tells a story about a coworker, Jim McCollough, who drank a mickey of alcohol before work each day and subsequently almost cut his hand off.

Geoff reflects on drug and alcohol use in the workplace, which he attributes to drudgery in the workplace.

1:38:41-1:43:31

- A brief anecdote about coal vendors who loaded coal by hand at Augustine Coal. Geoff was too young to frequent the pubs, but heard stories about the Terminal Pub and the Russell Hotel. Intimates that foreign sailors were looking for prostitutes. Discussion of separate pub entrances for women.

1:43:32-1:47:58

- Describes a May Day parade in New Westminster. Mentions a tailor at 6<sup>th</sup> street and Front St. famous for making zoot suits, where kids would come from Port Coquitlam to get measured. Describes “zoot suiters” in New Westminster acting like thugs on Friday nights on Columbia St. Public displays by “Holy Rollers” in the 1940s.

1:47:59-1:57:09

- Describes construction of the parkade in 1957, and states that it harmed industrial businesses that had been on Front St. Tells a story about 4-5 “hobos” coming into Webb and Gifford wash up; talks at more length about the culture of those “riding the rods” and how they came into New West through the railway. The businesses seemed accepting of these transients, according to Clayton. Mentions a “hobo jungle” in Port Coquitlam at marshlands near the CP yards, chased off by provincial police. Aline mentions that her father used to “ride the rails”. Geoff’s father was a psychiatric attendant and worked with men in relief camps during the Depression.