

Bill Burnett is a retired river pilot who worked on the Fraser River. The major themes discussed are river piloting, safety, training, fish, and ships.

Interviewer: Brian Ringrose

Interview Date: February 26, 2013

Date Range: 1960s – 1990s

Sound Recording Length: 1:14:57

Bill Burnett is a retired Fraser River pilot, whose main duties were to ensure that ships were kept from running around. The official river pilot station he worked at was called Sand Hedge, a lighthouse at the mouth of the Fraser River. River pilots help navigate a ship to and from the dock from a point c. 3 miles beyond the lighthouse. At 8 years old, Burnett knew he wanted to be a pilot after meeting a Dungeness pilot at a family wedding. (Dungeness is a port near Dover, England.) Burnett received his pilot training in France and Poland. In 1969, while in the process of getting his masters ticket (certification as a captain), he became enamored with the idea of working on tugs in British Columbia. During this time he was working on a Shell Canada tanker (which never went to Canada) sailing from the east coast to Venezuela. Since Burnett was employed by Shell he had Canadian employment and immigrated to Canada. Once on the west coast he first worked for Northland Navigation delivering groceries, then Vancouver Tugs (which became Seaspan) until things “went sour” in 1971 and he was cut from his job. Afterwards, Burnett worked on train ferries for CN and CP, eventually became a relief master, and then a master repairman on Tilbury Island. He worked there for 15 and a half years and gained his first river experience. In 1980, Burnett took and passed the river pilot exam, but he waitlisted and began piloting only in 1985.

Section 0:00 – 11:58

- In this section of the interview Burnett describes the duties of a Fraser River pilot and the jurisdiction that a Fraser River pilot works in, which is all the way up to Mission. Burnett states that being a river pilot is anything but boring because the Fraser River never stays the same, and weather conditions change daily. He states that he doubts that in his 26 years of being a pilot he encountered the same conditions twice. Burnett discusses that the challenges of being a river pilot because they work 24/7 in all conditions. The only thing that stops a Fraser river pilot from doing their job is a lack of water for a ship to proceed. Burnett also shares the story of how he wanted to become a river pilot from the age of 8. When he finally received his training to become a Dungeness pilot he changed his mind. One day he was working as a deck apprentice for a tanker, he saw the treacherous conditions that a Dungeness pilot worked in. Once Burnett immigrated to Canada he worked for Northland navigation on small coastal trading vessels, called “coasters,” delivering groceries. He discusses the other companies and the jobs he did until he became a river pilot, and how hard he studied to become one.

Section 11:59 – 22:46

- In this section Burnett goes further in-depth about his river pilot exam process and the 3month intensive training program that he went through once he finally became a river pilot. He describes the shock that most of the new river pilots experienced, who were used to seeing the Fraser River on smaller tug boats, because once they were on a larger ship the Fraser River looked much narrower. Burnett remembers that his first job as a

river pilot was working with steel ships. The ship he helped navigate hit the sand and lost power, and broke down again before it arrived to its final destination. He also details some of the issues with tides and working with smaller ships.

#### Section 22:47 – 35:24

- In this section of the recording Burnett discusses the changes he witnessed over time with ships and river piloting. When he first started, Burnett often worked on really old ships that went through multiple ownerships, there was no shortage of jobs as an apprentice river pilot, and that there have been changes to apprentice training. In this section he also describes his toughest experiences handling different types of ships, such as roll-on/roll-off (ro-ros) and car ships, in bad weather.

#### Section 35:25 -- 51:39

- In this section of the recording Burnett emphasizes how the biggest change he has witnessed is the disappearance of fish from the Fraser River. Burnett reports that when he worked during fishing season and there were approximately 1800 fishing boats on the Fraser River. He describes the difficulties of river piloting during fishing season because there would be some people who would not get out of his way, which resulted in the fishermen's nets getting caught. Burnett also discusses issues working with foreign crewmen due to language barriers. He also describes the Master Pilot Exchange Card (MPX), which he helped create. This was given to ships that he would help navigate which gave general information about the Fraser River, what the river pilots would expect the ship's crew to do, that communication would only be in English, and how many consecutive air starts the ships could have. He mentions a story of a ship that had issues with air compressors at Fraser Surrey Docks, which resulted in the ship losing power.

#### Section 51:40 – 56:31

- In this section of the recording Burnett describes difficulties of navigating in zero visibility. He also tells a "fog story" about how a river pilot, who may have been under the influence of alcohol, led a ship onto railway tracks in zero visibility. Brian Ringrose mentions that sometimes longshoremen who would go to a pub (which has since burnt down) by the Pattullo Bridge would ride on their 4x4s or trucks on the railway tracks to get to their jobs Fraser Surrey Docks to beat the traffic if they were late for work.

#### Section 56:32 -- 1:14:57

- In this section Burnett tells a story about when he was on a vessel he slipped and jammed his hands between the ladder and the ship, which resulted in injuries. He tells more stories about difficult conditions and leading ships to docks. Burnett states that he was never scared to experiment on the river and that he just had a knack for river piloting because he could always figure out ways to do things. Overall, Burnett states and that he loved handling ship and that river piloting was a great job.