

This interview is of Lorne Briggs, a retired ILWU local 502 longshoreman, who worked on the New Westminster and Vancouver waterfronts. The major themes discussed in this interview are camaraderie, cargo handling, drinking, “hard work,” mechanization, and automation.

Interviewer: Dean Johnson
Interview Date: May 31, 2013
Date Range: 1940s – 2005
Sound Recording Length: 2:02:21

Lorne Briggs is a retired International Longshoremen Warehousemen Union (ILWU) local 502 longshoreman. He grew up in New Westminster, and at 10 years old, he remembers exploring ships that were docked there. Briggs married at 17 years old, and at 20 years old he needed a job to support his young family. His brother encouraged him to go the longshore hall, which he did on December 22, 1961. Briggs also worked briefly at MacMillan Bloedel, drove a truck for a lumber company, and tried working as an electrician prior to longshore. Briggs reports that his family is one of the few families that have four generations working on the waterfront. He retired in 2005 at the age of 64, and during his career he worked in New Westminster and Vancouver. In this interview he largely discusses how automation and mechanization changed the work of longshoring, the camaraderie and brotherhood amongst the longshoremen, and why he believes the stereotype of longshoremen being “all brawn and no brains” is inaccurate. He states that there is no other labour job like shoring and that “you had to work it to understand it”.

Section 0:00 – 7:36

- In this section of the interview Briggs briefly recounts his family history, where he grew up, and his first longshore job. It was not until he worked a couple of other jobs that he decided to become a longshoreman. His brother, who is a year younger than him, started longshoring 6 months earlier and encouraged Briggs to go to the longshore hall. Briggs’ father was a longshoreman, but did not help him get his first job. He mentions his father did not want him to become a longshoreman but does not say why. His first longshore job was hand stowing lumber at Overseas Transport.

Section 7:37 -- 15:22

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses how the older longshoremen looked out for the younger longshoremen, and describes working his first job. He struggled to take care of his family in the early years of his career because work for casual longshoremen was not steady. He tells the story of how he was almost killed within the first 4 hours of his first job, the hatch cover fell in and he hung onto it. There was no formal training on the waterfront. After a few years on the waterfront he tried working at Westshore Terminals, but quit because did not want to be exposed the coal dust.

Section 15:23 -- 23:14

- In this section of the interview Briggs describes the cargo the longshoremen handled and the process of handling the various materials. He worked with loose lumber, zinc and lead bars, and bales of pulp that were 400-500 pounds. At Pacific Coast Terminals (PCT) he recalls in September he handled apples at the cold storage, and around Christmas time

he handled Japanese oranges. He remembers his first experience working with raw animal hides in Vancouver and describes it as a “sickening job”. He mentions that some longshoremen would vomit from the smell of the hides. He states that nickel matte was the funniest cargo because a football sized piece of it would weight 50-60 lbs. The longshoremen would have to manually unload pieces of nickel matte and sometimes when they tried to move a piece another piece might fall and smash the longshoremen’s fingers. Despite the difficulty of the jobs, he said the longshoremen always did it.

Section 23:15 -- 31:24

- In this section of the interview Briggs describes in further detail the types of jobs longshoremen did on the waterfront stating “some of the dumb jobs we did over all the years, it would blow your mind, people [today] wouldn’t understand it”. He recalls that even some of the smaller guys, despite their physical size, were really strong. He tells a funny story of a time when he worked with his brother and shorter longshoreman lifting plywood. He describes the different longshoremen subgroups: some were very smart, some wanted to fool around, and some were drinkers. The longshoremen would gravitate towards the people that were like themselves. He states that after working longshoring for a couple years, all the longshoremen would know each other’s names and stories.

Section 31:25 -- 40:27

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses safety on the waterfront, how certain jobs were done, and the changes in technology of longshoring. There was always noise on the waterfront from the movement of cargo, the safety warnings from the older longshoremen, and from the chatter amongst the longshoremen. When he first started the only protective gear longshoremen wore was a leather apron to protect their clothes. If the longshoremen had some money they would buy a pair of gloves from Eaton’s on Columbia St. He describes in the detail the changes in longshoring that occurred from working on liberty ships to containerization. He believes that packaged lumber came in 3-4 years after he started working, he states that it took off at Seaboard Lumber in Overseas Transport. He remembers that handling creosote was a job that would burn your eyes.

Section 40:27 -- 52:36

- In this section of the interview Briggs describes the changes of unloading car ships, and working at the different berths at PCT. The first method longshoremen used to unload car ships was with 4 hooks that would be put on the car’s wheels to be hoisted. He recalls as car ship unloading technology changed the damage to the cars was “unbelievable”. He states that in Canada, local 502 longshoremen were the fastest at unloading car ships, and could do it within 4 hours. He emphasizes that some of the longshoremen were “very smart guys that figured things out, they were like engineers”.

Section 52:36 -- 1:00:24

- In this section of the interview Briggs describes how it was a ritual for longshoremen to go to beer parlours during their hour lunch. He claims that in the 50s, 60s, and 70s New Westminister had more beer parlours per capita than everywhere else in the lower

mainland, and that the waterfront was an important part of New Westminster's economy. He notes that when ro-ro (roll-on/roll-off) ships came to the waterfront the foremen stopped being strict about ensuring there was no wasted space on the ships when loading materials.

Section 1:00:25 -- 1:04:03

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses the importance of the ILWU and states that the union has done only positive things for longshore industry. For the first 5-6 years on the waterfront he was not treated well until he became a member of ILWU. He talks about how his family has 4 generations working on the waterfront, and the things his family talks about when they get together. He believes that encouraging his sons to become longshoremen was the best thing he ever did.

Section 1:04:04 -- 1:10:31

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses how he socialized with his co-workers. The longshoremen horseplayed and threw things at each other, which he says was a lot of fun. Longshoremen could smoke, drink, and work at the same time. At lunchtime it was a ritual for a member in the gang to leave early for lunch to set up the table with beers at the nearest beer parlour. When the rest of the gang would come to the beer parlour their table would already have 30 glasses of beer waiting for them, because for \$1 they could buy 5 beers. He believes that some of the alcohol was well deserved because the longshoremen worked hard; however, there were longshoremen that were irresponsible drinkers. He also briefly describes the site of Fraser Mills.

Section 1:10:32 -- 1:19:26

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses some of the longshoremen who were famous for their strength and temper, the nicknames of some of the longshoremen, and the camaraderie and honour code amongst the men. He mentions the longshoremen would park their cars by the railroad tracks on Front St., opposite from Overseas Transport. He would leave his car keys in the ignition because he was scared he would lose the keys on a ship, and nobody would touch his stuff. He does not think the longshoremen were explicitly taught about the honour code, but that everyone knew about it. He and the interviewer (Dean Johnson) discuss how in the early days of longshoring there was a lot of gambling in the longshore hall. He mentions how some wives of longshoremen would come banging on the doors when it was payday because their husbands would gamble away their weekly paycheques.

Section 1:19:17 -- 1:34:20

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses the process of "rigging the tent", loading packaged lumber onto a ship, and parties and alcohol the longshoremen had on ships. When longshoremen had to work in the rain or snow they had to rig a tent to go over the open hatch so that the materials they handled, such as newsprint, would not get wet. Briggs states that sometimes it would take the longshoremen an hour to rig the tent, especially with an inexperienced hatch tender. Briggs describes the longshoremen who he

thought were performers and storytellers, and mentions sometimes women would be brought onto the ships from beer parlours to party. He mentions that whenever he worked in Vancouver the local longshoremen there knew different clandestine methods of stealing liquor from liquor ships.

Section 1:34:20 – 1:45:10

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses working into “penalty time,” when the union started caring about pensions, and more examples of the camaraderie amongst the longshoremen. Going into penalty time for the longshoremen was a big deal because they had to be supplied with dinner and would get paid \$8-9/hour. He believes that it was unfortunate that the older generation of longshoremen valued higher wages instead of work benefits and pensions. He recalls that even when he was diagnosed with cancer at 40 years old he never missed a day of work. When he worked on a car ship with 50-60 other longshoremen he would sleep somewhere on the ship and no one would say a thing to him.

Section 1:45:11 -- 2:02:21

- In this section of the interview Briggs discusses further in-depth about PCT, the strong longshoremen, the deindustrialization of the New Westminster waterfront, and the changes in the longshore industry. Briggs believes that the longshore industry made New Westminster prosperous in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, and states that he was disappointed when the City decided to get rid of the docks. He believes that the local 502 longshoremen should have protested on Columbia St. against the removal of the docks. He emphasizes that there was a true brotherhood amongst the longshoremen. He discusses when he first started the longshoremen never communicated with the superintendents; however, over the years superintendents increasingly have been giving orders to the longshoremen, and he does not think that people outside the industry should be hired to become superintendents. He finishes the interview by stating longshoring was “a way of life more than a job”.