

This is a recording is an interview with Bruce Briggs, a second-generation longshoreman who worked at the New Westminster dock for 35 years. The main themes of the interview are his introduction to the Local 502, handling of various cargoes, as well as the strikes and drinking on the dock.

Interviewer(s): Dean Johnson

Date: 13 May 2013

Date Range: 1950s - present

Sound Recording Length: 01:01:04

Bruce Briggs, is a retired longshoreman who began working on the New Westminster docks as a 15-year old. He eventually moved to Westshore Terminals for the last 17 years of his career. Having spent over 35 years on the waterfront, he has handled the full variety of goods that arrives on the West Coast, and tasted his first kiwi on the dock at Pacific Coast Terminals. He tells stories of the booming New Westminster docks, when the Pacific Coast Terminals could host between 12 and 15 ships at the same time, and the longshoremen and ships' crew would host parties on the boats. Work sites mentioned include Pacific Coast Terminals, the Rice Mills, and Fraser Surrey Docks.

Section 00:00 – 06:49

In this portion of the interview, Briggs describes how he was introduced to the waterfront by his brother and father who were longshoreman. He describes walking into the 502-dispatch hall at the age of 15 and his first days on the waterfront. He talks about the “old-timers”, and how they would teach you the skills when you were new.

Section 06:50 – 09:07

Briggs talks about the gangs and the manual nature of the job. He describes the collaborative nature and respect involved in the work, as longshoremen would help each other out. If you did not do your job, it was not the foreman who would tell you to go home, but rather the side-runner, the hatch tender or winch driver. He describes the changes he has seen in the union.

Section 09:08 – 11:09

In this portion of the interview, Briggs talks about how he left the Fraser River for Westshore Terminals in 1996, and remained there for 17 years. He states that being at Westshore Terminals meant working with many of the “old-timers” from the New Westminster waterfront.

Section 11:10 – 16:43

In this portion of the interview, Briggs describes a normal day as a longshoreman in New Westminster. It started with him driving with his dad from Surrey across the Pattullo Bridge at 5.30AM, catching breakfast in New Westminster, before going down to the dock or to the dispatch hall. He describes handling “fletchers”, and setting gear using the “lazy guy”.

Section 16:44 – 20:02

In this portion of the interview, Briggs describes manually uncovering the wooden hatch, and tells the story of an accident that almost cut a person in half with a wire.

Section 20:03 – 24:21

Briggs talks about operating the winch handles and later the forklift through the narrow spaces at Pacific Coast Terminals. He talks about the changes from manual work on the docks to the more automated work at Westshore Terminals.

Section 24:22 – 29:31

In this portion of the interview, Briggs discusses Pacific Coast Terminals, which he describes as the entire waterfront. The dock started at Pattullo Bridge and went all the way up to where Westminster Quay is today. According to Briggs, Pacific Coast Terminals was one of the places in New Westminster that created the most work for Local 502. He closes this section by talking about handling the PAD (Pacific Australia Direct) ships, and how there would be parties and drinking on these ships.

Section 29:32 – 34:42

Briggs discusses handling nickel matte, and how heavy it was. He returns to talking about the various docks at New Westminster, and how they would meet at Door 10 to be dispatched by the PCT foreman. On the New Westminster side, they could host 12 regular ships or up to 15 of the smaller *Liberty* ships. He did not like to handle grain, but had to when he was sent to Vancouver.

Section 34:43 – 42:59

In this portion of the interview, Briggs talks about how he has handled almost every type of cargo in his career. Sacks of rice weighed up to 250 lbs and were handled by 2 men. Burlap from the bags and fertilizer (another bagged cargo) also caused burns on the skin. However, he had to handle cowhides only twice, and graphically describes the maggots and juices that were on the hides when they brought them up from the hatch. Describes BC apples with pride. He tells the story about how his first time trying a kiwi was on a ship at Pacific Coast Terminal, as well as the freedom around handling the liquor ships.

Section 41:00 – 46:26

In this portion of the interview, Briggs describes being drunk on the job. If you drank too much, someone in your gang would tell you to sit in the corner to sleep it off, and the rest would finish the job. Not everyone drank. Longshoremen looked after each other to prevent drunk driving. He describes the general aspects of going on strike, the “90-day cooling-off process”, as well as the fines that were issued by the government when everyone did not return to work. Describes a time when the union leadership went to jail.

Section 46:27 – 50:07

Briggs talks about loading logs, and how he preferred to work in the water, as this was safer. The company provided strap-on spikes to put on your boots, but no logging boots. Most people could not afford logging boots from Copp’s Shoes on Columbia St, and used whatever boots they had.

Section 50:08 – 57:48

Briggs talks about the changes to lift trucks, gear on the docks and ships. He talks about the closing of the New Westminster docks and the effect this had on him. The 502 hall was still located in New West; longshoremen would still drive to New Westminster to be dispatched, but could be sent back to Surrey.

Section 57:49 – 01:00:17

In this portion of the interview, Briggs talks about getting food and drinks in the bars on Columbia St together with fellow longshoremen. He usually went to Best Hotel Pub or the Windsor, but also visited King Ed, the Dunsmuir, the Russell or the Terminal. He states that the pubs survived because of the longshoremen.

Section 01:00:18 – 01:05:29

In this portion of the interview, Briggs talks about the longshoremen's involvement in sports, and the local's hockey and baseball teams. The baseball team was called "The Longshoreman" and was supported by the local union. He also mentions the "The River Rats" that existed in the 1970s, but this team falls into what Briggs calls the "beer league". He closes the section by commenting on the "family day" that used to be on Sundays, as they did not work on then.

Section 01:05:30 – 01:08:28

Briggs tells how he would bring rain gear, leather boots, leather gloves and a pair of jeans to work every day. He discusses the first women working on the waterfront, and how he does not think that the waterfront is a place for women.

Section 01:08:29 – 01:15:57

In this portion of the interview, Briggs talks about how he took pride in his work on the waterfront. Subsequently, he talks about how the 7-day week and the 24-hour operation affected his lifestyle and his family, as well as the "split shift" that came with this change. He closes the interview by talking about how he sprained his ankle below on a ship, but was never off work due to injuries.