

This recording is an interview with Norm Stilitis, a former longshoreman on the New Westminster waterfront. Topics include different cargoes, equipment, the role of a hatchtender, and funny stories from the job.

Interviewer: Dean Johnson

Interview Date: February 19th, 2014

Date Range: 1959 – 2000s

Sound Recording Length: 1:22:54

Norm Stilitis is a retired longshoreman who spent his career working on the New Westminster and Surrey waterfronts. He got the job when he was 19 years old, when his father's friend suggested he try longshoring around Christmastime, since lots of people would be off for the holidays. He became a union member two years later and was trained to drive a forklift, which was one of his main roles. He discusses favourite and least favourite parts of the job, as well as changes in equipment, and descriptions of the work itself.

Section 00:00 – 02:39

In the first part of the interview, Norm describes the different docks that he worked on as a longshoreman in New Westminster. He recalls that payday was on a Thursday, and they would stop by the pub after work. He mentions various cargo – lumber, metal, etc.

Section 02:40 – 05:00

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes how he first got the job. He recalls the date, December 29, 1959. Longshoring was recommended to him by his father's friend. He describes the "shape-up" method of getting picked for work at the union hall. He was only 19 and not very big when he started, and had no previous experience.

Section 05:01 – 07:30

In this section, Norm describes how the old-timers would train the new guys, and tells the story of his first day of work. He was assigned to a mud ship, and accidentally shovelled coal into a burly longshoreman's boots. He appreciated the pay, but the job was physically tiring. He also appreciated the variety of work.

Section 07:31 – 09:30

In this portion of the interview, Norm details the various jobs done by longshoremen. He describes loading lumber, including the process of "butting out." He describes the role of a hatchtender in the gang.

Section 09:31 – 11:30

In this section, Norm describes "standing gear" in detail. He also mentions a piece of ship's gear known as the "lazy guy."

Section 11:31 – 12:55

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes a typical workday.

Section 12:56 – 14:20

In this section, Norm describes the training courses he took on the job, as well as ratings, pins, and plates associated with dispatch.

Section 14:21 – 16:10

In this section, Norm speaks to the lack of women in longshoring when he was working. He tells the story of a man who drove his forklift off a dock and died, and his widow was consequently given a job.* He does not recall any major discrimination happening on the docks, and described a diverse workforce.

Section 16:11 – 19:44

In this section, Norm discusses the pay and benefits of the job. He says it was the main reason he stuck around. He appreciated having the union. He became a union member in 1963, and was trained on forklift in Vancouver a year or two later. He tells the story of a forklift mishap.

Section 19:45 – 21:39

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes the docks at Pacific Coast Terminals. There were 4 berths, and he said he often worked with metal or apples there. He describes it as congested. He remembers the steam train.

Section 21:40 – 22:28

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes the equipment required on the job, such as a leather apron.

Section 22:29 – 25:40

In this section, Norm describes how they loaded lead and zinc. Everything was loaded by hand. He describes the iron dolly that was sometimes used for loading cargo.

Section 25:41 – 33:43

In this portion of the interview, Norm talks about the changes in machinery and technology over the years. The gang sizes became smaller, and work became physically easier. He describes the process of loading a hatch with a forklift. He explains a steam winch, and the change to automation. He describes hydraulic and electric cranes. He tells a funny story of filling canvas with ice from cold storage to keep their beer cold.

Section 33:44 – 40:20

In this portion of the interview, Norm talks about driving cargo from Overseas to PCT. The interviewer tells a story about a forklift driver who drove down Columbia Street. Norm describes

* This was a controversial event that led to the resignation of the local president. The woman did not keep the job.

Overseas Transport, and he thinks it had 4 or 5 berths. It was mainly lumber and plywood. He describes a coffee shop at Overseas, and tells a funny story about going for coffee for the gang.

Section 40:21 – 42:25

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes working “sack jobs” at the grain elevator. He explains what a “canary” is, a piece of equipment used for pulling slings.

Section 42:26 – 46:36

In this section, Norm describes the work done at Fraser Surrey Docks. PADS [Pacific Australia Direct] ships were common, and he describes how they looked. His main job was driving forklift. He tells a story of driving a Jaguar off a ship.

Section 46:37 – 48:10

In this section, Norm talks about the various watering holes where longshoremen would congregate after work. He mentions various bars, the Pastime Club, and a pool hall.

Section 48:11 – 50:16

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes the type of people who worked on the waterfront. It was more suited for a single person, because the work wasn't very steady to start with.

Section 50:17 – 51:44

In this portion of the interview, Norm describes social gatherings for longshoremen, such as summer picnics at Cultus Lake.

Section 51:45 – 57:50

In this section, Norm talks about the union and safety. He felt that the union was a good thing, and that safety has gotten a lot better over the years. Hatchtenders had to advocate on behalf of the safety of the gang. The Department of Transport had the last word on whether a job was safe to work.

Section 57:51 – 1:02:18

In this portion of the interview, Norm talks about injuries on the job. He fell 25 feet in a hole once, fracturing his ankle and wrist. They had to bring him out on a stretcher using a double gear pulley, in order to get him out of the hatch. He was off work for 6 months as a result.

Section 1:02:19 – 1:05:49

In this portion of the interview, Norm talks about working on scows, and loading logs. He is surprised there weren't more major accidents, and thinks safety has improved.

Section 1:05:50 – 1:07:15

In this portion of the interview, Norm talks about the King Neptune seafood restaurant.

Section 1:07:16 – 1:08:53

In this portion of the interview, Norm speaks to the sense of community on the waterfront. While he felt close with fellow longshoremen, he said that people from other industries didn't really interact. There were the occasional fights among longshoremen, but most got along.

Section 1:08:54 – 1:09:44

In this section, Norm talks about the first gantry crane at Fraser Surrey docks.

Section 1:09:45 – 01:11:47

In this section, Norm talks about camaraderie amongst longshoremen, and solidarity within the union. The union kept things fair. He recalls going on strike over conditions and wages, and having local grocery stores donate food. He felt the conflicts were resolved pretty well.

Section 01:11:48 – 01:14:30

In this section, Norm discusses how unpredictable, and therefore unstable, longshore work used to be. However, he enjoyed the challenge of finishing a task quickly and efficiently. He would still recommend longshoring to young people.

Section 01:14:31 – 01:16:16

In this portion of the interview, Norm discusses going through hard times when he first started the job. There would be weeks without a ship coming in, but unemployment took 6 weeks to kick in, and would be cancelled if a ship did arrive. It was unpredictable, and made planning difficult.

Section 1:16:17 – 1:20:00

In this section of the interview, Norm tells funny stories from longshoring.

Section 1:20:00 – 1:22:54

In this portion of the interview, Norm talks about the move to Fraser Surrey from New Westminster. He claims that it started because the local fire department realized they were loading fertilizer at the docks, and it was enough to "blow up the town", so they started loading it across the river. The interview wraps up.