

This interview is with Bobby Labinsky, a retired longshoreman with ILWU local 502. The interview revolves around his memories of work on the waterfront.

Interview Date: May 20, 2014

Interviewer: Dean Johnson

Date Range: 1954 to present

Sound Recording Length: 2:01:09

This interview is with Bobby Labinsky. Bobby Labinsky [deceased] was a retired longshoreman who first started working in 1954, and became a member in 1958. His father was Leo Labinsky, who helped establish ILWU in New Westminster and area. Bobby wanted to make money, and would work extra jobs on the side. In this interview, he talks about his family life, other workers, types of jobs he did, and his decision to go work at the Westshore terminals.

Section 0:00:00 – 0:08:00

- In this section, Bobby talks about his father's role in starting the ILWU, and his own beginnings in the union. Bobby's father started the ILWU in New Westminster, and affiliated with the international union in San Francisco. He was blackballed in New Westminster. No one would give him any credit. This would have been around 1935-1936, says Bobby. Bobby was born in 1936. Wally McEntire, Sam Beck, Tommy Thompson, along with Bobby's father, were instrumental because "they would plot these things," and they wanted a hiring hall. He also talks about the "shape up", Harry Bridges and the "massacre" in San Francisco. Bobby himself started longshoring in 1954 as a casual, and became member in 1958. He could have made member before then but his father did not want him to be known as the person who made membership early because of his father's influence. When he finally became a member, someone rose at the union meeting and said "'Brothers I just want to say one thing about Bobby Labinsky you can't put an old man's head on a young man's shoulders, he is a good worker,' that kind of thing." He said he initially was working at Woodward's, but someone he knew was making a lot of money on the waterfront. When he quit at Woodward's, his manager had a tear in his eye and told him if Bobby wanted to come back, he could.

Section 0:08:01 – 0:15:59

- In this section, Bobby talks about his first day on the job, and what the union hall was like. He handled 150lb bags of flour. He recounts how he fell backwards with a 150lb sack on his chest like a crab on its back. Wally McEntire asked "who the f--- are you?" Upon realizing Bobby was "Leo's boy" he picked him up and told him to get out of the way and not to get himself hurt. He said in the old days, dispatch was done on a peg system. He didn't like winch driving, he liked to move around a little bit more. He had his share of troubles too: he was making money on the side "tying up ships and letting them go." At the Searle Elevator he loaded up a Russian ship with wheat. As a result of doing this work on the side, he lost all his ratings for six months. He tells a story about Jack Singh taking over as side-runner from him when he temporarily lost his ratings.

Section 0:16:00 – 0:23:10

- In this section, Bobby talks about work that he did and goods that he handled, and safety. Everything was hand-stowed. Cargo included Japanese oranges in the wintertime, apples from New Zealand, mandarin oranges. In Vancouver, you got general cargo, coffee, etc.

When he worked at PCT, he remembers loading blocks and bars of zinc and lead. Zinc had sharp edges on it and you had to wear gloves because you would cut your fingers. He also talks about deep tanks. Safety was “common sense,” but the older fellows would check the safety on the ship. He remembers the safety on one ship to be okay, but Wally McEntire told the captain that it wasn’t to see if the captain would give him a couple of bottles of whiskey. Other cargo he handled included lumber, metal, flour, fertilizer, apples, and canned salmon.

Section 0:24:40 – 0:32:18

- In this section, Bobby talks about gangs and people he met on the waterfront, and revisits his transition from Woodward’s to longshoring. He talks about meeting Cy Baker (sp?) who was an “Indian Chief” in North Vancouver and was “like the head guy on the ship.” He describes using the assassinator. He talks about 13 men gangs. There were 8 guys below, 5 up on top. The 5 on top were the hatch tender, two winch drivers and two sling men. He also talks about missing working at Woodward’s, but that it was not enough money.

Section 0:32:19 – 0:41:57

- In this section, Bobby talks about what New Westminster was like the past, the money he made, he continues talking about jobs he did, liked and disliked, and a work partner when he was working in Los Angeles. You used to be able to walk the whole waterfront in 20 minutes. In 1960, an average shift was 9.55 hours, and take home pay was \$160.00/week after taxes. He remembers an undated strike in which the union managed to win \$2.47/hour, and the longshoremen were called “the aristocrats of labour.” He hated working on hides. It was slimy, smelly and had maggots on them. You wouldn’t be able to take the bus. But he also said there was lots of dust, lead concentrates, sulphur, asbestos, and so on. He also talks about his work partner while he was working in the United States, and how this man took a liking to Bobby because this man was marrying a Canadian woman, and he liked to hunt.

Section 0:41:58 – 0:51:29

- In this section, Bobby talks about a typical shift that was 8-5. Bobby talks about different ships, like Norwegian, Greek, East Indian, and Malay ships. Afternoon shifts were good because you would get 9 hours’ pay for 6 hours’ work from 5:00pm to 11:00pm. He spoke about a loophole where longshoremen were briefly able to do split shifts in such a way whereby they would get paid for ten hours’ work for only doing four hours’ work. He said when Westshore came along, people thought that the men who went down there were crazy for taking a pay cut, but the men down there would get an additional \$1,000 “tapped on your gross earnings” each year they worked, so it was only a matter of time before longshoremen there wound up making more money than the “main industry.” He spoke about how some people lost seniority when they went over to Westshore, and how that became an issue the union had to contend with.

Section 0:51:30 – 0:54:28

- In this section, Bobby talks about Westshore. He got in trouble from time to time for cutting corners. He was a high earner at Westshore. For 10-12 years, he said, he would go to the dispatch hall, and sometimes he wouldn’t get work still, so his first wife was always confused why he worked for 10-12 years but sometimes was not able to get work. His wife used to handle the finances.

Section 0:54:29 – 0:59:12

- In this section, Bobby talks about training. He remembers getting lessons to drive Hyster lift trucks when they first came in. He said it was fairly simple to understand how to use a lift truck. The talent with driving a forklift was not operating it but in not damaging goods, like a bundle of plywood. He said you would take special care if you saw cargo with someone's names on it. Personalized cargo was treated with care.

#### Section 0:59:13 – 1:05:37

- In this section, Bobby talks about Vancouver. In Vancouver, there was more work. In New Westminster and Vancouver everything was hard work and hand-stowed. Commodities included fertilizer, zinc, lead, timbers, fletchers (dimensional lumber), concentrates, fertilizers, flour, and wheat. Nowadays, the hardest part of work in Westshore for example is staying awake. Foremen were responsible for whatever the workers did right or did wrong. He complains about “labour fakers,” who don't take the job seriously or don't do it correctly. He recalls a story about a coworker drinking and a load of lumber going into the river.

#### Section 1:05:38 – 1:14:57

- In this section, Bobby talks about beer parlours, Curly Smith, and other characters. He referred to Curly Smith as Smithy, No-Socks-Smith, and Strang Storpedo. In his lunch pail, he had half dozen boiled eggs and baking soda. He said he was missing some fingers and pieces of fingers. Bobby's father gave Curly Smith a pair of socks because he never wore socks, and Curly wound up using them as mittens. Bobby said he was from Cape Breton. Bobby also remembered people who would borrow money all the time, but once they borrowed money from you they would never do it again. Tommy Lindal, Roy Smith and Red O'Donnell also came up. He talks about drinking at places like the Dunsmuir and Russell.

#### Section 1:14:58 – 1:18:20

- In this section, Bobby talks about how he did not socialize that much with people. He said he had some very strong opinions about how union men should have conducted themselves, and he rarely socialized with other longshoremen other than drinking. He mentions Ayn Rand's “Fountainhead” and “Atlas Shrugged.”

#### Section 1:18:21 – 1:27:15

- In this section, Bobby talks about Westshore, and the master contract. He went down to Westshore in the fall of 1969 or 1970. He said in 1960 – though he also wondered if it was 1958 – there was a strike that resulted in a master contract for all the ports. Before then, the employer would play the longshoremen against each other by sending work to one city/port and not another. For eighteen months they were without a contract, though Bobby clarified that in situations like that, the old contract continues to be in force. Some people referred to Bobby as “no sweat” but he justifies this by saying that he “had more brains than to break my back,” but that he always worked and was always “hustling” to get work. He remembers Lou Laliberte and Stan McBride as friends.

#### Section 1:27:16 – 1:31:48

- In this section, Bobby talks about his family life. He didn't socialize with the longshoremen much, and being a longshoreman did not affect his family life in any major way. Occasionally he would play pool with his father, and go drinking with longshoremen. “Life is

a series of mistakes, some are better than others,” says Bobby, and he lists his first wife Zelma, and his second wife Lee, and making the decision to go to Westshore as his “best mistakes.” He speaks about his divorce. He and his partner Lee never married.

Section 1:31:49 – 1:36:05

- In this section, Bobby talks about safety. He did not have to wear special clothing, though the employer recommended wearing steel toed boots. He remembers getting hurt on the job when he got his “toe banged up” while loading timbers on the deck during winter. He also recalls causing an accident and hitting a guy with a load of “dunnage,” though he also notes the guys were careless in the hatch.

Section 1:36:06 – 1:42:33

- In this section, Bobby talks about companies he worked for. For the most part “they were okay as far as I was concerned.” He said Empire was probably the worst, they would sneak around between the decks, everyone was drinking in those days, and Empire foremen would utter “You’re fired!” He also tells a story about Charlie Watson firing him.

Section 1:42:34 – 1:49:41

- In this section, Bobby revisits the topic of his younger years. He remembers that in his childhood he and his brother Gordy would go visit his dad at PCT and get 50 cents or a dollar and they would go to see a show, and then go home on the tram. He remembers the “romance” of the thing, by which he means the diversity of things you would experience on the waterfront while working as a longshoreman. He also talks about smoking cigarettes.

Section 1:49:42 – 2:01:09

- In this section, Bobby talks about his father. Bobby said that his father was an alcoholic, and that most alcoholics treated their wives pretty bad. His father came back from the Second World War as an alcoholic. He also tells childhood stories about himself and his brother Gordy getting into trouble. He said he left home at the age of 13, and got a boarding room. He continued going to school, but he worked at Woodwards to pay for rent, which was \$30/month.