

This recording is of a monologue by Dean Johnson, a retired Local 502 longshoreman and former shop steward. In this recording he shares stories about the types of work that longshoremen would do in the 1960s and 1970s.

Interviewers: None (self-recorded by narrator)

Interviewee: Dean Johnson

Date of interview: 20 January 2014

Date range of topics covered: 1961 onwards.

Sound Recording Length: 0:21:22

Johnson was born and raised in New Westminster. He got his first longshoring work in Prince Rupert at age 16, but then when he was 17 he starting longshoring in New Westminster in 1961. In 1975 he started a steady job at Westshore Terminals. In this recording he shares stories about the types of work that longshoremen would do, and some of the characters “on the beach.”

This is the 3rd of a series of recordings done with Johnson.

0:00:00 – 0:01:33

- In this section, Johnson describes working at the Overseas Terminals on the Fraser River, and, that each day 1,800-1,900 sacks would be moved from ships onto railcars. He tells a story about how one day he worked extra hard to finish early, but there wasn't the pay off he was expecting because he slept the rest of the day.

0:01:34 – 0:02:47

- In this section, Johnson talks about working with sulfur. The sulfur would be poured into a hatch and it would form a cone that would need to be leveled. There would be 4'x8' sheet of plywood with handles cut out of it which would be rigged up to a crane, steam wenches and pulley blocks inside the hatch. The plywood, which was 1" thick, would be used to level off the sulfur so that hand-stowed lumber could be placed on top of it. This was an awful job, says Johnson.

0:02:48 – 0:05:10

- In this section, Johnson talks about loading and stowing big items. First, he talks about moving pulp using hand trucks. The pulp would be in 400 lb bails. The bails would be placed on bars, which would allow the bails to be rolled into a hatch. Johnson also speaks about “planting” the loads which would involve carrying several bundles of pulp at once; this he describes as an easy job. It was just a matter of unhooking the bundles from the winch, and the winch drivers and train operators could do it themselves. 900 lb rolls of paper were also loaded using a big hand truck. Later, suction cups would be used which would go in the centre of the paper roll and it was moved even more efficiently.

0:05:11 – 0:09:01

- In this section, Johnson talks about moving the paper rolls, which would be a process going from operating a hand truck, to then a lift truck, and then to planting the paper. He tells a story about a series of unfortunate errors that happened on the docks one day when a hand truck broke down inside the hatch, and then a scow broke away from the ship, and he didn't get to leave work until 1:00am.

0:09:02 – 0:10:36

- In this section, Johnson talks about the entrances to hatches and the shipment of loose lumber. In the first part of this section he talks about the ships with deep tanks for ballast, which had a 6' x 6' entrance. Loose lumber would be situated on the edge of the hatch and then tipped up so it would slide in. This was described as a very dangerous job. The main hatches, which were 20' x 20', would have sweat boards, and pieces of lumber that were 26' would be tilted and rolled into the hatch. Johnson notes that lumber would be flying all over the place in the hatch, and then the longshoremen would get down into the main hatch or the deep tanks as the case may be, and hand stow the lumber that had fallen.

0:10:37 - 0:12:13

- In this section, Johnson talks about the evolution of techniques for unloading cars from car ships, including Japanese and Korean cars, which he describes as tightly spaced. He notes that when longshoremen moved between and amongst cars on a ship, they would be packed so tightly that the longshoremen would scratch them by passing by. Initially they used nets that would pick up the car. It was a hard job to do, and many cars became damaged by accidents caused by the winch driver. Next, they used lifting equipment that attached to the cars' tires. The next innovation was the development of a cage with a flap, which would be used to move cars.

0:12:14 – 0:13:29

- In this section, Johnson continues describing the unloading of automobiles, noting that next innovation was elevator ships which preceded the roll-on/roll-off ships that exist today. He says the longshoremen would “peel rubber” driving the cars off the ship.

0:13:30 – 0:14:45

- In this section, Johnson lists many of the characters he met “on the beach.” He spends most of this section talking about Big Len. Big Len would “work like anything.” When he finished loading or unloading his side of the hatch, he wouldn't take a 5-minute break as Johnson had hoped, he would instead go over to the other side of the hatch and help the others.

0:14:46 – 0:15:51

- In this section, Johnson talks about the day he quit “McGrath's gang”.

0:15:52 – 0:21:22

- In this section, Johnson talks about Curly Smith also known as “No Socks Smitty” or “Strang's Torpedo,” after the then president of the BC Maritime Employers. Curly Smith was originally from “Nova Scotia or Newfoundland.” He was a heavy drinker and had only 5 fingers. Johnson tells a humorous story about him and some of the other then-younger longshoremen who hid Curly Smith's wine as a trick. Smith took the biggest of the guys and grabbed him by the throat and put him up against the beam in the union hall, after which no one ever played tricks on Curly Smith again. Johnson remembers seeing Curly Smith passed out on 10th Street in New Westminster, and also passed out on the docks in the winter. If he had to work the next morning after such a night, he would get up, unphased, and get to work. Johnson says he saw Curly Smith five years after retirement; he had quit drinking and met a woman who treated him really well, and he looked better than he ever had when he was a longshoreman.