

INTERVIEW WITH WARDELL CANADA 2-2-95

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

B: Wardell, tell us where and when you were born.

W: I was born in Tacoma, WA on Oct. 27, 1951. I've lived here all my life.

B: Where did you live?

W: I guess they call it Hilltop area. The edge of Hilltop area. We never thought about Hilltop then, but on 2116 S. 12th St.

B: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

W: Yeah, I have one sister, Wanda Ross.

B: Does she still live in Tacoma?

W: Oh, yeah.

B: Yeah? The whole family is still around?

W: Yeah, we're stuck in Tacoma.

B: You're stuck in Tacoma. Okay, so tell me about your parents. Your mother is still alive?

W: Yeah, my mother is.

B: And she still lives in Tacoma?

W: Yeah.

B: When and where was she born?

W: My mother was born 75 years ago in Arkansas. And she came out here during WWII. She worked in one of those shipyards out here, back in the days when a woman could work.

B: Right. During WWII, they really wanted the women to work, didn't they?

W: Right.

B: And then as soon as the war is over and the men come home, it's...

W: They don't need them no more.

B: It's go back and get your aprons ladies.

W: Right, right.

B: What did she do in the shipyards?

W: I think she was some kind of welder or riveter, or something.

B: Oh, 'Rosie the Riveter'. That's what they called them. That was a big job around here for women. And your father? Where was he born?

W: My father was born in Tacoma, here.

B: Oh, he's an old Tacoma guy then.

W: Yeah, he was.

B: Do you know what year he was born?

W: Around 1917, or something like that.

B: And he is no longer living, right?

W: Yeah, he passed in 1984, of cancer.

B: When did he start longshoring?

W: He started longshoring about the same time as I was born, about 1950 or something like that.

B: I had tried to pinpoint when he had started working down there through reading the books. I thought 46' was too early, he wasn't there then. But from what he was saying, I kind of thought right around 1950. What had he done before that? Do you know?

W: Oh, my father did a lot of things. He had did all kinds of, he had worked at foundries, he had worked at bartending. Oh, a lot of odd kind of jobs like that. He didn't get into a career until he started his longshoring.

B: How did he get started longshoring?

W: I guess he just went and got a job.

B: Just went down and started. He didn't have any relatives or anything?

W: No, back in those days he said he'd go down there and sit around the hall and just wait for a job to come in. He just hung out there until he got in.

B: Okay. So how did your mom end up in Tacoma from Arkansas?

W: That's a good question. [laughs]

B: You'll have to ask her sometime.

W: I really couldn't say. You know, a lot of people came up from the south, came up this way. A lot of GIs through the service, but I don't know what brought her up here.

B: Was she married to your dad when she came up here?

W: No, she met him here.

B: So how long did your dad work on the waterfront? Did he work down there until his death, or had he retired?

W: He retired in about 1978.

B: 38 years. That's pretty long. So what were his feelings about the longshoreman's union?

W: He loved the union.

B: The oldsters loved the union, didn't they?

W: He loved it because it was really good to him.

B: Oh, yes, it was. And in those days it seemed the job took so much physical labor, that the union really protected the guys and got them what they were worth. Instead of letting it all go to the owners.

W: Yeah, he appreciated the fact that you had the union protecting your rights and you had someone to turn to if you did have problems.

B: And did he ever say anything about... well, tell me some of your memories. You know memories of when you were a kid. I have memories of my dad coming home from work.

W: I remember back in those days sometimes, him coming home soaking wet because he fell in the water.

B: He fell in?

W: When they were working the logs off the water.

B: From working the boom?

W: Yeah, sometimes he'd fall, come home, and change clothes, and he's back out the door again.

B: Oh, I see. Fallin' off the boom. Have you ever had to work the boom?

W: Yeah, in my time.

B: They don't do that so much anymore do they?

W: Oh, they still have some of it left. Logs. Whenever you have logs, you have boom. But it's not the same as it was. Back in those days they had what they called little pecker poles, that are maybe a foot around. Nowadays we have logs, maybe 2-3 feet around. Plus all our logs are tied in bundles. Back in those days all the logs were loose. They had to run across them, hook them up and run back. It wasn't a whole lot of weight holding you up, so you had to be pretty agile out there. I remember him doing that, and then I remember my father doing a lot of traveling back in those days too.

B: To get the job?

W: I remember him saying he's going to Aberdeen or he's going to Port Angeles or he's going... somehow it's stuck in my mind that he was traveling a lot. Back in those days they did do a lot of traveling.

B: And there were certain ports that they would travel to, weren't there? Because weren't they ILA and not ILW... U?

W: [laughs] Well ...

B: That was before the merger?

W: Oh no, that was after the merger, we were all ILWU, but there were a certain kind of sentiments held against us in Tacoma, because we were the last ones to become ILWU. We were the last hold-outs. We were ILA until the very end.

And that's another thing, because he always said, all the time he was traveling, all those other ports, they always treated you like a brother, but he felt discouraged about Tacoma's union, because when people traveled up here we didn't treat them like brothers. He felt that the people who traveled up here to work were treated like second-class citizens and he didn't appreciate that.

B: Interesting. Kind of treated them like outsiders.

W: Right. I've kind of noticed that myself. I have traveled to other ports. I've gone all the way to San Francisco, I've worked down there and they just welcome you with open arms. They say, "Come on, what do you need? We'll take care of you." And I've seen guys come to Tacoma, it's like, "Who's that? What does he want? Where is he from?" It's just more of a standoffish kind of thing.

B: But that's been an interesting aspect of your union though, because they have been so, kind of on their own little road.

W: Yeah.

B: Besides, when the other longshore unions were getting together, the Tacoma union was definitely doing their own thing. And even when it came time to merge. That was quite something, reading about it.

W: It was a battle... it was a battle. And there were a number of black folk involved in that. I don't know if you're going to be talking to Jack Tanner, but I've heard Jack talk about how his father was involved in the evolution of Tacoma from ILA to ILWU. And I remember Jack talking about his father welcoming Harry Bridges to the house and then after Bridges got in, pulling the shades down, closing the door and putting the .45 on the table, just in case somebody wanted to come in and rush them.

B: Yes, Ernie Tanner was mentioned as someone who was really for the merger.¹ Is that correct?

W: Right.

B: Why was that do you think?

W: I guess he believed in what Harry Bridges was doing. He believed in the strength of the ILWU. I don't know what his particular philosophy was about that.

¹Ronald E. Magden, The Working Longshoreman, (R-\$ Typographers, Inc.: Tacoma) p. 181.

10

B: Maybe it was, get the whole group, instead of your own little offshoot there. It's hard to imagine having the strength, if you're just going to be a little group apart from everyone else. If you could close down Tacoma, but if nobody else is closing down, guess where the business is going to go. It's not going to work very good.

W: I don't know what handwriting he saw on the wall, but I think he felt, that he believed in that and as time has shown, it was the best way to go. It was the right decision. As us together as a whole united coast. We had been one of the strongest, most powerful unions. Most long-lasting, holding the strength for the longest period of time, also.

B: It's been interesting reading about the Tacoma longshoremen, because they are the richest, so they say [W laughs] in the books, and they have had open hiring since it began, as far as hiring blacks, and I think it was in 1966, it took that long, for Portland to open up theirs.² I think that was interesting...

W: Well, you say open, but it's a relative term.

B: For sure.

W: That's an interesting point, to find out that just recently Portland was that backwards, of blacks being so restricted there, I also remember my father saying that they had a way of restricting blacks up here also, by just taking two at a time. Whenever they would open the books up, take anyone in, they would take just two blacks at a time.

B: Oh, really?

W: So my father and a few other people, by the time it came up for my bench, which was 1978, they made a point, they took more than two of us. They took eight of us at that time. And that was unprecedented for them to do that. So, open is a relative term.

B: Well, actually the union, it's been really interesting reading about the hiring practice. And the A-men, and the B-men, and the casuals. I was glad that I went down there [union hall] on Monday [1-31]. Even though it was raining like a son of a gun. It was dark, and on a hill with a river coming down it, and I wondered what was I doing here, but I went in, and the bell rang and all of those guys lined up. That's really unusual, I'd never seen that.

W: Oh, dispatch system.

B: Yes, I'd never seen that. See to you, that's just a way of life. But to me that was really different.

W: If you think that was something, I went down to San Francisco, and their dispatch is even more hectic than ours is. They have three... sections, like a dome area in the front there, and they have one side of the triangle they pick the lift and the house and all that kind of stuff, and on another side they're picking winch drivers and on another side they're picking the lashers. It's all going at the same time.

And they have speakers picking at the same time. These speakers are focused for the lift guys, and these speakers are focused this way for the crane drivers and winch drivers, and these speakers are focused over here for the lashers. It's like, I'm trying to figure out what's going on, I trying to see if I want that kind of job I have to listen over here, if I want that job I have to listen over here.

²Ronald E. Magden, author, talk to class, January 14, 1995.

B: You have to be on your toes ready to move to the line, huh?

W: Yeah, it was interesting.

B: I'll bet. So did your dad ever mention any feelings about race relations down on the waterfront in his days?

W: Hmm. Well, like I said, he said that was one of the ways they controlled us, by keeping our numbers down like that. We had really no power, no real say in anything, you know, so...

B: Yes. If they were never letting no more than two, there's not very many guys in there.

W: Yes, they never had enough to constitute any kind of coalition or any kind of majority. You believe in unionism and you believe in voting rights, and all that kind of stuff, but if you have so few blacks in there they kind of got diluted in the system, their power, their voice.

He believed very strongly in the fact that we should get involved in union politics, as a way to exercise our rights. It was really easy to lay back and just do your job and not really get involved with things, but he believed strongly that in fact a person should get involved, because the more you got involved, the more power you gained... And my father is an example of one of the people who did gain a certain measure of power and respect down there.

B: Yeah, I saw he was the vice-president.

W: Yeah, and for a black person to be vice-president down there, that was a big deal.

B: Right. In many unions really.

W: Yeah. So he did that. He was able to do that and people still come up to me and say, "Your father was a great guy." And some people will tell me he was a great politician. He got in there and he wheeled and dealt as far as... He knew how to build coalitions among people, based on what was right instead of being based on whether it benefits black people or white people, but based on doing the right thing. And try to ignore when possible the race kind of thing. Although he knew what was going on.

B: For sure, he'd have to, but...

W: But, I'm thinking I grew up around a number of these old time, black longshoremen.

B: I bet you did.

W: And you know like the Tanners, and some of their relatives, and the Claxtons, the Alexanders. And these guys were black men... diluted among white men, but they still had their dignity. All right? They had paid their dues, and they walked with dignity. You know? That's why it's kind of strange to see that Portland didn't take any black people until 1966, but when I first came down here in 1968, or 67', we already had black foremen, and black gang bosses.

B: So there had already been some inroads into the union.

W: Yeah. Like I said, the ones I knew, they rose to the level they wanted to rise to. I didn't see anyone holding them back. I didn't get the impression, anything they wanted to do, they wanted to be a gang boss, you know, gang boss was a big deal back in those days, well, they were gang bosses.

My father, he just wanted to play the field, but he was a respected winch driver by the time I got down there. And they all rose to the level they wanted to.

But when they restrict your numbers down there, you only have so many people that want to rise to the top. The more people you have, the more people you have rise to the top. The less people you have, the less people you have to rise to the top. So even though we had some people on the top, and in the middle, and on the bottom, we were still diluted wherever we went down there. And still are.

B: Still are.

W: Oh yeah... yeah.

B: I think that's a pretty common story, unfortunately. I was amazed that Tacoma in 1896, when they started, they stated at that time that it would be open to anyone, regardless of race, color, or creed...the whole thing, religion. And then to hear about Portland, 1966. Wow, that is a big difference. So tell me a little bit about your experience of growing up in Tacoma. I know you went to Wilson High School. How did you end up at Wilson?

W: [laughs] Ah...

B: You were in the Stadium district, right?

W: Yeah, I was in the Stadium district. I don't know, it was a mistake. [laughs]

B: Going to Wilson was a mistake? Let me write this down. [laughs] Mistake.

W: I don't know. I went to Stanley in grade school, and I went to Jason Lee Junior High School, and for some reason I didn't want to go to Stadium. I felt like I would get a better education at Wilson. Sometimes I think I was brainwashed into thinking I'd get a better education at Wilson, so I ended up going to Wilson. And then I get up there, and I'm one of five black people up there.

B: Right. Just about, very few.

W: There was just a handful up there. Kimi Ginn, the Russells,..

B: Jocelyn Foote.

W: Darrell Hunter was there, or he came a year later. Alan Claxton.

B: It was very, very, I would say, it was a minute portion of the population.

W: There were 2,000.

B: I know, my graduating class was almost 800 kids. It was huge.

W: It was a big school and we were [gestures] sheeew. I made a big mistake going to Wilson.

B: It was an experience. Did you feel ostracized?

W: I felt isolated, I really felt... you remember how cliquish that school was?

B: Really cliquish. You know there were times I felt isolated there.

W: There were kids whose parents were doctors, they were leaders in the community, they had the Sheltons, the Civitanichs, the Maitlands...

B: The Fircrest kids, that's what we called them, though the ones you mentioned weren't all from Fircrest. They were a cliquish group.

W: I know. There were a whole bunch of cliques up there and I really felt left out up there, and I made a mistake.

B: So high school doesn't have any great memories.

W: Nooo! There's a few friends, a few nice people up there, and like you said, you see those, the friends you made, and the rest of the people you don't really care about. I never cared about going to reunions. I didn't like most of them when I went there, why go see them again?

B: I went to one, curiosity I guess. Afterwards I said, "I don't need this." It wasn't that much fun. It was kind of the same old thing. Same old people, in the same little groups. I guess I thought it would be different, but it wasn't. So after Wilson, then you went to college?

W: Yeah.

B: UW?

W: Yeah. I was thinking back on it, I think I went almost two years at the UW. No, two years plus. I had three different apartments over there and at the beginning of every year, I'd get another place, so I was over two years up there. It was all right.

B: So then you went to TCC?

W: I went to TCC for about a year or so.

B: So do you have your associate's from TCC?

W: I have... memories [laughs]. When you mention it, I probably could convert some of my UW credits to TCC and get an associate's.

B: Probably still can.

W: That was the best school I had, at TCC, because that's when I finally focused on something. I started a bookkeeping class, and I liked that. And I ended up taking about a year's worth of accounting behind that.

That was the first time I could see how white people controlled everything. You know how they say accounting is the language of business. All of a sudden they're talking about deficits and capital, deficit spending, credits, and debits, and net worth, and all that kind of stuff. To ordinary black folks, to ordinary people period, this would mean hardly anything, and to all of a sudden, to see how these guys come up with the decisions that they did and how they manipulated the situations, "Well, you're not qualified, because your net worth is not this, and your account payables are too high versus your assets, and your net worth is down", and those kinds of things. And I said, "Aha, so this is how they control." It was just like ahh.

B: That's how I feel about my classes lately, really eye opening. So that's why it's the way it is, so that's why we're in such a mess.

W: Yeah. You finally get your eyes opened to what's going on, and the mechanisms they use to control situations, it's like oh... ok.

B: Do you have any other relatives working on the waterfront?

W: No.

B: No? Nieces or nephews going to follow in their uncle's footsteps do you think?

W: Well, like I said, I don't think there will be hardly any waterfront to follow up on in the next ten or twenty years.

B: That's coming up later, I have some questions about that. That's an interesting aspect. Okay, so you went to work for the union part-time during high school. When was that?

W: About 1967-68.

B: What did you do when you first got down there?

W: A lot of lifting. [laughs]

B: A lot of lifting. You were a strong, young guy though, I'll bet they saw you coming?

W: Well, yeah, I was a strong young man, working with a bunch of other strong, young men. We lifted, we rolled rubber, you know bales of rubber back in those days. We threw sacks, of flour, and peas, and stuff. We did meat. We lifted boxes of frozen meat that came out of the tubs, we would sort that kind of stuff. A lot of physical, a lot of boom, you know boom work, working out on logs.

B: I got a kick reading Ron Magden's interview with Signal. He used to talk about how he didn't want to have to go back up, off of the booms, so he'd just lay down on the logs and take a break.³

W: A coffee break?

B: I guess. I thought, now that's an interesting spot to take a break. Lay down in the middle of the boom. He sounded like an interesting guy.

W: Oh, he is, very interesting person.

B: So, I'm just asking this question to have it on tape. Are you married?

W: Nope.

B: Do you have any children?

W: No.

B: The reason we ask that question is if there is a researcher in the future, who becomes interested in your story, and wants to find out more and you're not around, he/she would maybe want to look up some children.

³Signal, personal interview by Ronald E. Magden, March 13, 1992.

W: Oh, some of my relatives. Fifty years down the road.

B: What made you decide to go into longshoring? Just your dad working?

W: Well, I don't know. That's a good question. Because I remember when I was taking those accounting classes I was thinking, I was still doing longshoring part-time, I was thinking I want an accounting job. Because I could get a bookkeeping job or something like that. They pay your rent, plus give you a salary. I was still kind of young and wasn't really committed to longshoring. It was so laissez-faire, you could come and go as you wanted to, more or less.

I was just kind of floating around. And I decided no, it was more like, I don't want to go into accounting. I wanted to stay with something I knew. I just started longshoring a little bit more and a little bit more. I just, it was so convenient. That's why I stayed there.

B: Okay, convenient. Sometimes that's how we end up where we are.

W: Yeah. I could work as much as I wanted or as little as I wanted and still do whatever I wanted to do.

B: And still make a pretty good living.

W: As much as you wanted. That's one thing about back in those days, there was so much work around here back in those days, plus I had my father and his influence down there. As an umbrella...

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

B: You were saying your dad was an umbrella, and that there was lots of work in those days down there. When you first started you considered going into accounting, but because of the convenience of being able to work when you wanted to, you chose longshoring.

W: Because my father, I appreciate more and more now, just how much of an umbrella he was for me. Because there was a number of black guys up here who did not make very much money. They almost got starved out.

That was one way they got rid of people, with the dispatch system they had in those days for casuals. If they didn't like you or didn't want you, you would just not get dispatched, and you wouldn't work. But they liked my father, so therefore they looked favorably upon me. So all I had to do basically was show up, be pleasant, do my job, and I had it made. Whereas other guys didn't...

B: They didn't have that edge.

W: They didn't have that. They had to earn theirs. And to me, it was more given me on a silver platter.

B: Your silver spoon.

W: Yeah, the one, that's it. Hm.

B: And what are you doing now on the waterfront?

W: My category is a crane driver.

B: This is the big orange, red ones?

W: They're blue now. The overhead cranes, container cranes.

B: How long have you been doing that?

W: Oh, the last three or four years.

B: Do you like it?

W: Yeah.

B: What do you like about it?

W: It's warm in the wintertime [laughs] and it's cool in the summer. And you are basically the center of the action on the job. You handle the cargo, all the cargo, so it is a responsible kind of job, and it's a good job. And I like driving those kinds of things, crane kind of operations. Before I became a crane driver I was a winch driver, ever since I got into the union.

B: That was 1978?

W: Yeah. So I've been driving the whirly cranes on the ships and the winches and the standing gear and all of that kind of stuff. I like driving those kinds of things, where it takes eye-hand coordination.

B: You really have to know what's around you too, when you're driving that, right? That's part of the danger of it.

W: Yes, it is a dangerous job. It is a danger because it's easy to hurt somebody.

B: If they're in a spot you don't expect them especially.

W: Oh, yeah.

B: When you see the size of some of the things you're handling, yes indeed. Did you receive any training to drive the winch? Or is it just something you picked up?

W: Driving winches back in those days, everything was on the job training anyway. So I just go out there with somebody and say, "Can I drive?" My father, I drove with him, I drove with anybody I felt I knew well enough to say well enough to drive for. So I drove. As far as crane, we had a formal training program, back around 1979, 1980. I took that.

B: How long was the training?

W: About a week or so.

B: It's interesting. I was talking to a friend who works at Simpson Paper Mill, and now they say any new hires that they get has to have an AA degree.

W: An associate's degree?

B: An associate's degree, because so much of it has become computerized, they've got to have someone they can train to work the computer's. So much of it. I found that interesting. He's been there for years, and he used to work the pond [logs], but now he sits at a board and watches the flashing lights on the computers.

W: Well, in a way our job is getting something like that also. There is so much computer, supervisory work, checking work. Everything is more and more screens, and carrying bigger concepts in your brain. Whereas before it was just lift up something and put it there and lift up something else and put it over there. Now you have to deal with the planning involved and keeping track of patterns, you know, driving patterns for the strads [straddle carrier] and the hustler, and knowing the yard. It's no big deal, just learning the patterns.

B: We hope to get a tour of the port next week. I've looked at pictures of all of these machines, because I had never even heard of a strad. I know what it is now. So how long were you a casual?

W: From high school, 1967-68 to 1978. About 11 years.

B: So you went from being a casual to an A-man?

W: No. B-man, two years.

B: Is that what you mean by your bench?

W: Yeah, B bench.

B: How do you get to be an A-man? Do they vote you in?

W: They decide after a period of time, that they want to take their B-men in and make them A-men.

B: So they just take all of them?

W: Yeah, they took all of us in, I think it was so many a month, they didn't take us all in at one time, but within a few months we were all in.

B: What do you feel are the keys to promotion?

W: The first key is initiative, personal initiative. The second key is opportunity. The third key is luck.

B: What about personal ties? I noticed many relatives working down there.

W: Doesn't hurt. Yeah, that's right up there with initiative. Probably have to put that up as number two.

B: Do you deal with the employers personally, or does the foreman do that?

W: Yeah. I don't have that much direct contact with them at all.

B: So there isn't much relationship with them? Do you ever get to know the guys from Sealand or Maersk?

W: A friend of mine is a foreman over there. I don't deal with an employer, per se.

B: You deal then with their employees?

W: Which is the foreman, who gives me my directions. I work as directed. I work as directed. I learned that lesson.

B: You have to, after seeing that whole line of guys wanting work, you've got to work as directed to keep that job.

W: Yeah, the way I learned that phrase, too. Man. There was a foreman down there that hated my guts. He taught me that phrase. He hated me, he harassed me, he rode me, every opportunity he got. Finally he got around to a point. I knew he was a racist and everybody knew he was. Even some of his own relatives told me he was a racist.

He finally made up an excuse to fire me one day. He told me I was not working as directed. So he fired me, and the job was my own gang. I got the guy who was my replacement to quit, so I could check back into my job the next day. And I'm driving up and walking up, and he's talking to his buddies up there, and I don't know what he was saying. His chest was all stuck out and yak-yak-yak, and suddenly he turns around and sees me and oh...

B: He didn't expect to see you.

W: Yes. Just kind of deflated his kind of thing, and I'm still there. And I'm back. That's one thing I learned from my father. You could get knocked down... Someone had fired me years ago, when I was a casual. He was riding me all day long, also. And I knew it was part of a racial thing, he just had that superior kind of attitude. He finally said something, "You don't want to do something because you're black, or you think you're better because you're black", or something. I just blew up. I cussed him out. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I cussed him out and called him every word I could think of. He said, "You called me this and that. You're fired!" I said, "Fine", and walked off the job.

Back in those days when a casual got fired, he got thrown off the waterfront. There was no ifs, ands, or buts. A casual getting fired, you knew you were done. And I go home, I'm just ready to tear something apart. My mother asked me what's wrong. My father comes home and he asked me what happened. I tell him. Bingo, bango, he's on the phone. He gets done making these phone calls, then tells me, "Okay, you go back down to the hall tomorrow. You go back." And it was like, wow, this kid got fired and then he's right back on the job.

That's when I learned that even though they do try to knock you out, try to pull something on you, you get right back up and get right back to what you were doing. If a horse bucks you off, you get right back up, and you ride that horse again. And when that individual fired me, and I got my job back, I wanted to make a point. Go right back to the same job, same place, same time, bingo. Here I am, okay let's go to work.

B: "And I will do as directed."

W: He didn't say a word to me. And also, the upshot of that was that he had been drinking. I didn't know that. I got called in front of the executive board because of this, and one of the other foremen had told one of the guys I was working with that this particular foreman had been drinking. He made the comment, "He was drinking on the job, and that doesn't mix." They weren't talking about me, they were talking about him.

So by this foreman basically spilling the beans about this other foreman, all of a sudden, that gave me such a good case. And when it came before the executive board, and they asked me if I knew he was drinking. I didn't know he'd been drinking. He messes with me like that all the time. One of the guys on the executive board happened to be the guy, the foreman, that told about the drinking incident, and he was telling us, "Yeah, Wardy took so much more than I would've took." This particular foreman rode him so hard, I don't know how he took it. And he took more than I would've taken. I had such a good case. My father had just passed, too. I didn't realize how good a case I had.

Because actually, I had that foreman... how to put this in your terms, I had him right where I wanted him. And if I would've squeezed, he would have been gone for about a year. As far as I had him dead to rights for abusing and harassing, I had him for the drinking on the job. The executive board tried to wash it, they recommend to let the incident drop. I said, "What do you mean, let it drop?" One of the labor relations persons told me, "If I was you, I'd let it drop." So in a way he was saying, if I press this, I am going to create enemies.

B: So they were sort of protecting this foreman?

W: Yeah, they were protecting him. If I had pressed for my wages, because I didn't get paid for that day. If I had pressed for my wages, it would have been official why I got fired, and he would have been in deep doo-doo.

B: So you didn't press for wages then?

W: I didn't press for anything, but the upshot was he didn't mess with me again. Because he knew he was wrong. He knew I had him. I can see him looking at me, and he just wants to say something, he wants to do something, but he was put in check, by the system. And by the fact that he had something hanging over his head.

B: Well, you had some power there. too.

W: Well, I learned something about power, about the uses of power. When to use it and when not to use it. As a matter of fact, if I had a little bit more knowledge, I would have had even more power. I could have twisted and squeezed a little bit more.

B: Right, but by not reacting to him before, when he was harassing you and you were saying that people didn't know how you put up with it. If you had maybe reacted then, you would have been the one brought to the executive board for causing a fight, maybe.

W: Yeah.

B: By waiting him out, he's the one who miss stepped, and they came down on him, too.

W: It worked out that way. I can't say it was by design so much. I think it was my personality. I'm a laid back kind of person anyway. And I was just... "What's wrong with him?" And when I was a casual, casuals didn't have any rights, so we had to take things. But I was a B-man, no, I was an A-man when this happened, but we get kind of conditioned as a casual to have a certain kind of attitude. I learned afterwards, the fact that I did not react, that I had a certain amount of control. That is how you do accumulate power, but not so much by reacting. Sometimes you have to think before you react. Certain kinds of restraints will work to your advantage.

B: Interesting. Have you ever been injured at work, Wardell?

W: Yeah, I have, a couple of times. Yes, I got in a couple of collisions when I was driving a fork-lift down there. Kind of a whiplash.

B: With other fork-lifts?

W: Yeah. I was coming around a corner, and this one foreman was driving down road through the warehouse, and I came around a blind corner and ran into him. And that started my back on it's road to deterioration.

29

Then I had another incident when I was working the boom. We had these long slings, that we had to loop around these bundles of logs, and I was holding onto one end of this long sling waiting for the winch driver to line the boom up over the bundle. He had it boomed down so far, this was old Thompson gear, he had it so far and when you boom it down 90 degrees like that, it is gets really hard to control, as far as your lateral movement. And he somehow tried to move one way or the other and all of a sudden it just jerked. And all of a sudden I'm hanging on to this sling that's like the end of a whip.

On second I'm standing there and the next second my feet are up and I'm traveling parallel to this bundle of logs, being whipped along across the top of these logs. I was fortunate I came out it, because after it the boom stopped and at the end of the sling comes down to the water, dragged me through the water and then I butted up against another bundle of logs. The water had slowed me down enough that it took most of that impact away.

B: That could have been really awful.

W: I could have been dead. I finally let go of it. I saw the other sling come at me and I didn't want to let my sling let go and get wound crazy like their sling was. And all of a sudden I'm flying here, I hit the water, I hit the bundle of logs and I let go and slowly sink into the water. I remember someone fishing me out of there. That didn't help my back problems either.

B: Do you still have back problems?

W: Yeah. Just hyper-extended everything. I remember myself, I'm glad I did it just kind of instinctively, I expelled my breath, uoh. I could feel myself just folding around that bundle of logs. It was just like a piece of spaghetti. Just bend that way and then bend back.

B: My body doesn't bend that way.

W: About the only time I've ever gotten hurt was in those situations.

B: Sounds like you've been pretty lucky then.

W: Yeah. I've been fortunate.

B: So how is stress down there? Do you have much stress?

W: Well, everyone has stress in the position I'm in. Like I said, being a winch driver or a crane driver, you make everything happen. Everything is depending on you. You handle every load. If you don't move it, they don't get moved. Or if you don't move it properly it takes too much time. There's a certain amount of stress in that. But this is something I've always liked doing, I like driving those things, so you just deal with it.

B: Do you come off the job all tense?

W: Sometimes it is just so hard. And sometimes maybe the job is finishing and everyone wants to get done, and you're not making things happen as quickly as you'd like it to happen. They look up at you like, "What's wrong with him?" There is a certain responsibility. That's a little distress, but it's nothing I can't handle.

B: What are the requirements for a union member?

W: Go to work. To maintain your union membership in good standing, I think you have to work about one day a month. To maintain your benefits, you have to make 800 hours a year, and pay your dues.

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

B: How much are your dues?

W: Right now they're fixed at about \$120.00 a month.

B: Those are pretty healthy dues.

W: Yeah. We have gotten ourselves into a few financial binds and wheeler dealers in the real-estate game...

B: Okay. Do you go to union meetings?

W: Yeah. Well, not as much as I as I should. When I was involved in the Black Longshoreman's Association [BLA] I went to the union meetings fairly regularly. You know, my father said, "You should get involved", but the habits I had developed as a casual persisted and I really did not get involved the way I should.

The only time I really did get involved was when I was involved with the BLA, because one led to the other. If you're involved with a political organization and trying to do something, you have to keep up with what the other organization you're dealing with is up to.

B: So you can find what's going on.

W: How you fit in, how you're going to manipulate the political fund.

B: It sounds like being a casual kind of formed your identity as a longshoreman. Tell me about that.

W: Yeah. Back when I was a casual, we worked with our fathers. All of us came down there and our fathers got us on. It was like an already established hierarchy. You were already used to, you live in your father's house and living with his rules. And when you got to the job it was in his house, working under his rules. And when he said you do this, you do that, you did it. You didn't question anything, you just did it. And we were socialized, or acclimatized to go along with the program, and that's what we did. We did the work.

Also back in those days, Tacoma was really a go-getter kind of port, where we believed in moving cargo. So there wasn't a whole lot of time for messing around, so we became a part of that go-getter kind of climate. But also, there were racists in any aspect of life. The bottom line wasn't money. As long as you could do the job, do it well, didn't get in anybody's way, didn't slow or mess up an operation, you could...In that narrow perspective, to me I didn't notice anybody care. If I came on and did the job, I was doing it well, I was fitting in, as far as working on everything. Then, it was cool.

That's one thing we learned as casuals, we did work side by side, there was a lot of cooperation necessary to work. The kind of jobs, lifting, kind of like ants. It took so many ants to do this and they had to work as a team. We did look at it as a cooperation, socialization thing that they don't have down there now.

B: You mentioned that the other day. Comradeship.

W: Yeah. It was a teamwork atmosphere, attitude. "Maybe I don't like you personally, but we have to get the job done, so let's just go ahead and do it." And do it right. Man. Then we'd get the job done and go our separate ways. I don't like you and you don't like me, but we're both here to make money, let's go ahead and make money, and be cool about it.

B: Overcome your personal differences for the duration of the job and that's it.

W: Right. And know your rights. Know what you had to put up with and what you didn't have to put up with. And as long as you knew your rights, then you knew when to stand up and when to back down. If you were wrong, I learned if I was wrong, okay, I'm wrong, I'll take it. But if I'm right then I don't have to take it. Let you know.

So you learned your rights in the process and you got along that way. You earned a certain kind of respect. I already had a certain inroad with my father, a built in kind of thing. His positive spirit and influence. The people that liked him, liked me. If he wasn't there, they were there, and they kind of watched over me. So I had this, I had it made.

B: An extended family, a little bit. Or an extended kinship.

W: I had that, and a lot of these guys didn't have that. It was nice for me.

B: You were working with guys that you had known for lots of years through your dad?

W: Yeah. That was one of the reasons we did form the Black Longshoreman's Association. To make up for that, because now they don't have this kinship, or umbrella kind of thing where their father's watch out for them. We formed the BLA to take the place of that. Someone to watch out for the casuals in their situation.

So we tried to duplicate that. I know when I was there, my father, all the black longshoremen, all those guys were watching out for me. Plus among the white people, my father had a number of friends, and I could hang with them, under their protection, their circle of influence.

B: That trust was built in, you felt you could trust them. Where a new guy, they don't have someone to say, "That guy's okay". That's a feeling out time that can be pretty touchy sometimes.

W: Like going to Wilson High School.

B: Back to Wilson High School experience.

W: They wanted to call me Lucius, and everything. At first I kind of played along with it, but after a while I said no I don't like this. Then try to get them to stop, once they get started, it was hard to get them stopped. I remember guys liked to hang spit on the ceiling and let it drip down on you. One time the guys, I was already steamed up about this Lucius thing, and I don't know if you remember Steve Wilson, about 6'6". But he had hung a loogie up here, I don't know if he had done it, but I come along in my letterman's jacket, and all of a sudden this thing drips down on me. And oh man. He starts laughing. I'm 5'10", I grabbed him and slammed him up against the cage in the locker room, and said, "Man, don't you ever call me Lucius again, or I'll kick your blankity-blank-blank." "Okay, Wardy, okay, Wardy." Nobody ever called me Lucius again after that. But other than that, nobody was out front...

B: Why would they call you Lucius? I've never heard that.

W: It's a slave kind of name. You know, "Lucius, go over there and get that, Lucius." Like Sunshine and Shadow. I had never heard it until then, and I haven't heard it since. A kind of stereotypical thing they picked up on. Then they want to play it out on somebody. I went along with it for a while and then...

B: High school is a tough enough experience and to have that going on, too. Whoa. We could do a whole chapter on Wilson.

W: "Lost at Wilson."

B: When did the BLA form?

W: That's a good question. Let me put it this way, probably in 1990.

B: Is it still in existence?

W: Bits and pieces, I guess.

B: But not formally an association anymore? What happened?

W: Not like it was before. Like so many black organizations, black people have a problem getting along and keeping a focus, keeping a direction. Attitudes, egos, start flaring up and flashing out. Ended up going our separate ways.

And that's been the history of black people, ever since we were brought to this country. As far as our socialization with each other, it has been stripped out of us. If you look at the Irish, the English, if you look at the Scottish, Italians, the Vietnamese, the Koreans, the Japanese, all have a socialization that they can hang together. They can get something done. But the black people, the way we were brought over, the slavery thing, we were stripped of everything.

B: The families were so fragmented. Pulled totally apart, socialization was lost for many years.

W: Yes. We can't, even now. Look at what happened in the NAACP, the infighting they have over there. I saw something on TV last night about Malcolm X, and he was talking about how Malcolm X's group, he splintered off from them, the Nation of Islam and how they ended up fighting among each other. And Malcolm was saying how even in Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam, Elijah Mohammed was bumping off people in his own organization because he didn't like them for this and that reason. Black people, man, we've got a real problem as far as hanging together and really acting as one. And really helping each other. We're just lost like that.

B: Finding a common goal.

W: Yeah, and being able to work towards it without, "You think you're better than me and I know I'm better than you." Or someone trying to get an advantage. Or you're doing this to get an advantage, to get advantage of a certain group. Oh man, it's really sad, really sad. I had heard about it all my life, but we thought that once the BLA could get together, we'd overcome this sort of thing. And to see it get caught up in that kind of back wash. It was sad. Our philosophy, people's philosophies differed about the direction of the organization and it just kind of fell apart. I guess a few of the guys are still... it was a springboard for a few people to go on, to get involved.

B: With the general union meetings?

W: In the union, in general, more involvement. It was a point my father was saying. You do gain power by getting involved with what's happening with the union. I learned that myself, I had to be elected to a union position to just get involved in union business. And you gain a certain amount of power, a certain amount of influence just by getting involved in union business. It was interesting.

B: It's always a learning experience, isn't it? And I've been involved with lots of groups, and getting along is hard in any group. There are several different ways people come at a problem, and you have to be able to understand these different ways, and a lot of people don't.

23

W: And then you throw in race, and those kind of special little things. The kind of baggage black people are carrying. We're carrying baggage that the rest of society, the rest of the world...

B: But has nothing to do with you, but it does, from 200 years ago.

W: Not years ago, but for the last 400 years. Not years ago, but the last 400 years on this continent. Not counting the kind of attitude that people had towards black people even before slavery, or America was even going on.

Slavery has been going on for thousands of years. But it was never carried out to as cruel a degree as it was in America. It was never as cruel, or dehumanizing, or humiliating, as it was in the United States. The kinds of things they did to us, it's like... wow. They're talking about getting certain history, they've got things called slave narratives.

B: We've read some in our history class. Have you read Harriet Jacobs?⁴ She hid in her grandmother's attic for seven years to keep from having to be kept by her master. She had children, but couldn't see them. It was just really heart rending.

W: Yes. People are not really aware of what's going on. I mean this Anne Frank, the whole world knows about it. But just a little black girl, a little black slave, who cares? Who knows? We have lost so much, even what we went through, we have even lost that, what they did to us. The kind of baggage, the kind of injury they did to our psyche is really weird.

It's really scary, where now it's gotten to the point that we're turning around and killing each other. You know talking about hopelessness, about the kids, hopeless, helpless. I can't do anything, they can't do anything, as far as a social world or social life, as far as dealing with the white man, but they can think, "Well, I can have power over other black people. I can kill other black people. I can't have any power or deal with anybody else any other way except without killing them". We're just so whipped in such a way, it's scary.

B: What's scary is how it's been perpetuated, very subtly. More people are becoming aware, but I don't know if enough to change. We're getting off of the subject, but you have some real interesting insights. So you've told me some of your experiences with racism down on the docks. What are the biggest problems for African-Americans down on the docks?

W: Lack of numbers. That's our first problem. The more of us that are down there, the more we could influence things and not feel so helpless. That's what I was saying, the old-timers. Even though they were a few, they were gritty guys. John Alexander, he was a foreman. Rudy Harding, he was a foreman back when I started down there. They were foremen. They were men among men. It wasn't like I'm a black man. They didn't bow to anybody and they were just...

B: Do you think it is maybe because the union as a whole had to be more cohesive and work together more? Whereas now you say they don't have the comradeship. So everyone is more isolated?

W: Yeah. That's a good point. Isolated, plus the work is so sparse. The pie, back to the economic thing. There's just less work to go around, so people start fighting harder for that one little slice of pie, that little slice of area down there.

Our biggest problem is lack of numbers, and a certain kind of self esteem like the old-timers had about themselves down there. A lot of these guys say, "We can't do this, we can't do that. They won't let us do this and they won't let us do that." Ernie Tanner wouldn't be talking

⁴Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, ed. L. Marie Child, Intro. by Walter Teller, (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: New York, 1973).

about that. Jack Tanner wouldn't be talking about that. Ed Claxton or his father, Jim Claxton, they didn't talk like that. They were there. These were not guys who went around saying, "We can't do this or that", they went out and got it. My father went out there and got it.

So to listen to some of these guys say we can't do this or that, they won't let us do this or that, I just say that's part of this brainwashing, that came out of slavery days. All this civil rights thing, this victimization, we're victims. We can't do this, we can't do that. That is the most insidious kind of racism there is out there. We have gotten so brainwashed we're believing our own helplessness.

The chain, remember they were talking about the elephants and the chain. You train them for awhile until they get conditioned and then you put a string on them, so they can still feel the resistance, they'll stop. We have been conditioned like that. We have been trained like that. It's scary. It ticks me off. Right now, we have black foremen down there. As much as I got, as I wanted to get out of it, I could have gotten more if I'd wanted. I should have had more, but I rose to where I want to be. I could have been a crane driver years ago, but I was happy where I was, driving winches. I was getting what I wanted. I got what I needed. I was good to go.

B: You mentioned, and we've probably covered, how you feel things have changed for blacks since your dad's days. As far as the lack of numbers, that was always there.

W: Yeah. That's always been a problem. There was more consciousness about it. We've always been conscious about it. Through the BLA we've put it on their consciousness a little bit. That's our biggest problem, lack of numbers. To have enough people to rise or fall as they want.

B: And then the comradeship has definitely changed since your dad's days. They were shoulder to shoulder as they used to say.

W: Yes. There is no comradeship among black people, well, there's always been a certain kind of camaraderie of 'us against them' kind of atmosphere among black people, so there's a little bit of that. There's a certain kind of camaraderie between white people and black people, but not like it used to be. There's been a lot more areas. Since there's less understanding, there's more misunderstanding. Years ago, you might be able to square something away, get something understood, now it becomes all blown out of proportion and you've got problems.

B: How has knowledge of black history helped you on your job?

W: Well, the more we understand where we come from and what we are about, it's just a background. It gives you a foundation, an understanding of who and what you're about. Reading the slave narratives, little bit of Malcolm X, and just getting involved in the BLA. Getting a feel for flexing our muscle a little bit and being a part of the longshoremen organization. We did some interesting things. We ended up uniting the whole west coast for a period.

TAPE 2, SIDE 2

B: So the Association was not just Tacoma?

W: Oh, no. As it turned out, for a few years before we got together, Portland had been getting together. We happened to hook up with Portland, and then all of a sudden we hooked up with San Francisco, and then we hooked up with LA. For awhile there, we had the first real organizational coast meeting in Tacoma. San Francisco, Portland, and Tacoma were here. Even Seattle was represented. Then we went down to Oakland or San Francisco, that's where I met my girlfriend. We went down there, and that was a big meeting. Met some nice people, and created some good relationships, some interesting relationships. We were kind of a union within a union. We did have a little bit of weight there for a minute. We were organized. We were organized even more.

As a matter of fact, there are certain parts of that organization coast wide that are still in effect. So we did do something. We got noticed, we got to say a few things, and we got to start influencing things. Politics, sometimes results are one thing, but to influence is even more important. As long as they're not just running over you, now they're at least considering you. They're dealing with you. We had some serious inroads and we had some interesting people in our corner.

Some of those people from San Francisco, they were old fighters, old fighters on a very high level. The kind of level my father was on. They had been doing it for quite a while. That was interesting to be able to get in touch with those guys, and to see black people doing these kinds of things. Operating on a upper level different than where we are. White people, they can look at the presidents, they can look at CEOs. They can look at anybody and they can relate to that.

To actually see these guys doing this kind of thing, all of a sudden it gave us something to relate to. All of a sudden we start understanding, "We can do this. We can deal with the white man on his level." It's one thing to know it, but it's another thing to see it. That was really interesting. You listen to anyone around here, you wouldn't think there were any black people really involved in union on an international level. But there are some.

B: A lot more than you think.

W: You start understanding that yes, we can do all this and all that, if we want. It's all there. It's just like my father kept saying, "It's all there, you just have to go out there and get it."

B: We saw an interesting movie on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.⁵ It was the first black union. Several of the organizers from that went on. One was instrumental, he was the guy who got Martin Luther King, Jr. involved in the Montgomery bus boycott an, and he was the one who organized the whole thing. He had that thirty years of experience in union organizing that enabled him pull together that whole thing.

There was another fellow from that same group that organized the march on Washington [DC]. Probably without that union experience, there might have been a different outcome. Those were big organizational tasks, and there was probably a lot of turns in the road that other people might have been turned back.

W: Yeah. Getting involved in the BLA, I started to do some research and started to understand, black people and unions has been a fight that's been going on for a long time. Just how black people were treated in unions on the one hand. There were separate black unions. There were white longshoremen and black longshoremen's union in different parts of the country. In Louisiana it was that way. And in other industries there was a lot of that going on. Black people have been having problems with unions for years, since unions have been involved. It was interesting, starting to research that kind of thing.

B: Oh, it's real illuminating, isn't it? And even more so for you, being a black man in a union.

W: After awhile sometimes you get into overload and start getting into it, because there's so much going on. You can't get it all in fast enough, and you get frustrated because you want to shift more information, you want to cram more in there, but your CPU is overloaded. Black people in a union is an interesting situation. A struggle from the get go.

B: I think it's going to be an interesting struggle for unions everywhere. The way the country is going right now. I think we're going to see a lot of problems for unions coming up.

⁵ Miles of Smiles, documentary on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, video, 1981.

W: Right. The economy is dictating that, with less jobs, more people are fighting for a particular job. And the employers saying, "We'll not have a union shop here anymore, but you guys can work for a dollar less if you will not join a union." And there are so many people saying, "Yeah."

B: Because they need to work.

W: And it's even much more than a dollar. These guys are working for \$22.00 an hour, and these guys come in and work for \$12.00 an hour and no union. These guys on unemployment. Yeah. They'll go for that \$12.00. It's becoming an employer's market now. "You want to work, you come work for my terms. I'll take care of you, I'll give you some halfway decent benefits." It's just like they're destroying the unions, one by one. Picking them off, picking them off, and now they're coming after us.

B: Do you think so?

W: Yeah, they're coming after us. The employers coming after us. That's one of the things I'd hate to... Let me put it this way, Jack Tanner came and talked to us one time, and like I said Jack grew up in the union tradition. He spoke to us and told us, "What are you going to fight for? What do you want? Do you want union rights, or civil rights?" What he was pointing out was, is if there is no union, your civil rights aren't going to be worth diddly. Our civil rights, we can do this, that, and the other. We could destroy this union. But then once you destroy it, what do you have left? What are your civil rights going to be worth? He was telling us to be careful how you stepped.

B: Was this to the BLA?

W: Yeah. He spoke to us.

B: Let me just ask you this. Is it politically correct to call a woman a longshoreman? Do you call them longshoreperson? Or longshorewoman?

W: [laughs] I call them longshoremen. You can get so carried away in those insignificant, nonessential kinds of things. Just longshoremen.

B: What is your outlook for race relations in the future? Your chance to be a predictor. It will be on tape, forty years from now, when you're eighty years old, you can go down and see what you said.

W: For posterity. "Look what you said." It will get better, because we did sow some seeds, and some food for thought. We did provide a springboard for certain people to get involved. We set an example for getting involved, that you could get involved.

B: That's an important thing, too.

W: I keep coming back to my father, there's always these handles for advancement or power. They're always out there, just get involved and then you get influence and with influence you gain a certain amount of power. There's always going to be someone doing something like that down there, as far as black people are concerned. We can disagree on anything, but we'll always agree that we need more black people down there and I think we'll always unite in some kind of fashion behind that. We will try to push for more equity in numbers down there. And then, the numbers will take care of themselves, and the members will take care of themselves. Like I say, "If you take care of the back end of the shovel, the front end will take care of itself."

Once you get more black people down there, then we'll be all right as far as taking care of our civil rights within our union rights. We'll be able to demand more equity treatment, and not demands in a formal kind of way, but you'll be able to stand up and say this is my rights, like the old-timers did. This is my right.

Back in the old days, there were a whole lot of black longshoremen, Ernie Tanner, Jim Claxton, and those guys. When those guys were starting, back in the twenties and thirties, there were a lot of black longshoremen in those days. Everyone was more rugged back in those days. Once these guys learn to stand up for their rights, understand their rights, and not have a victim kind of attitude, then we'll be okay.

B: So a lot of victim attitudes?

W: Yeah. When they stop feeling like we can't do anything, and understand they can do something. And just go out there and do it, and take care of business in the process. That's another accounting thing. You have to make sure all of your assets and account receivables add up, and account payables and all your capital add up on the other side. You have to learn how to take care of business.

That's one thing black people have to do is learn how to take care of business. In a very business kind of way. Once they learn how to do that, then have a certain kind of positive attitude about themselves, they can do it.

Look at Reginald Lewis. He's the president of TLC, Beatrice Foods. It's like, black people have been doing these things. Look at Bill Cosby, look at Oprah. They take care of business behind the scenes. They may act like certain buffoons up front, but behind the scenes they are taking care of business.

Once we learn how to take care of business, and have an attitude for taking care of business, and make sure all the t's are crossed and all the i's are dotted. The confidence of doing that and to project that and let the kids that are coming up behind us see these things. Give them the example for them to do that, then we'll be okay, as a union, as a community. That's what we have to do.

B: Union and community... that's a good one, too. How do you feel the community looks at longshoring? I've been talking to people since I got involved in this class and it's interesting what people said. I want to hear what you think.

W: [laughs] They probably think we're a bunch of freeloaders. I don't know how the community feels about us. If they're really aware of what we do, a lot of them don't even know what we do. Maybe they think we're still lifting sacks, or we're overpaid for what we do...

B: That was the general feeling from people I talked to, that you were overpaid for what you did.

W: Right. The thing is, we're paid commensurate to other unions with mechanization... we have gotten so good at our job, we can make it look easy.

B: Sounds like Tacoma, especially. Several records have been set in Tacoma, for turn around time for unloading, for lack of stealing. Was it Panasonic? They were looking for a port to go to and they went to one, and they were losing stuff right and left. This was before stuff was containerized, but they were just getting to that. But they came to Tacoma, and the Tacoma Longshoremen said, "Hey. We want this bad enough, we'll keep our hands off it." And they did. And got the contract, and Panasonic was very happy, because they didn't lose stuff.⁶

⁶Philip Lelli, longshoreman, talk to class, January 14, 1995.

W: They were only happy up to a certain point, but we don't have them anymore. They're right down the road with a non-union outfit working with them. That's the gratitude they had. On one hand we did a good job for them. There was no pilferage, no breakage, but their gratitude was going down the road with a non-union outfit because they don't want to pay our wages.

That is one of the weirdest kinds of things. Tacoma has been such a go-getter of a port all these years, but we still don't have the work. We're still traveling to Seattle to go work. They have the work. Seattle had the worst reputation for production, but they have the work. What are we doing wrong?

B: Is it that thirty miles of water, do you think?

W: No. I think it's our port, the Port of Tacoma.

B: Like the directors and managers of the port?

W: Yeah. The Port of Tacoma. The office down there. They have a philosophy that they just want to work cans and cars. Cans and cars, very little upkeep. Just a tenent-landlord thing. You just rent your property out. You park your cans there, you park your cars there, no maintenance, no hassle. They have that kind of attitude. They're putting all of their eggs in one basket.

They're forgetting about all the people who built this port up so they could get all of these cans and cars. They're letting all their warehouses go, they're tearing warehouses down. All this warehouse work, all this general cargo work is going to Seattle. Because we don't have the warehouse space, or they don't want to put in a cooler. Not a freezer, a cooler facility to handle all the apples and things.

B: There is no facility like that?

W: No.

B: Originally, to get the port passed, the longshore union members went out into the county, that hadn't passed the port, and sold the farmers on the idea of, "We're going to have cold storage down here." That cold storage is what swung the deal for Pierce County that got it voted. And now many years later the cold storage is gone. And that was the sell point to the voters to get the moneys passed to develop the port.⁷

W: And just when the apple market is trying to open up to Japan, all of a sudden we don't have storage for apples. It's like these guys, casuals in Seattle, work 5-6 days a week. Our casuals in Tacoma only work 1-2 days a week. All that general cargo, which is manpower intensive kind of work, going to Seattle. We got container cranes always not working somewhere. But we can't guarantee these lines, our port can not guarantee these lines that have small cargo loads, we can't guarantee them a crane facility.

There is always someplace they could go, if the port got off their butts and worked it out. We've lost 3 or 4 lines to Seattle like that. They say, "Well, we can't guarantee a facility", so they go to Seattle. Those are the little things that add up to a big thing. We're losing all little things.

There's a paper the PMA puts out. It shows the ports' tonnage and how it goes up and down. We're the only port on the west coast, who in all categories, our tonnage, cars, cans, general cargo, and everything is going down. All the other ports are going up. Our Port of Tacoma is really letting us down.

B: Is the union doing anything to try to change this?

⁷ Ronald E. Magden, talk to class, January 14, 1995.

W: They talk to those guys until they're blue in the face. These guys, they are ensconced, they have their jobs. They're taking the sweat of what we have done for all these years and they are just saying, "Well, forget you. We're just going our own way. We're in charge now and we're deciding the direction now." They're waiting for the bridge to be taken out, and for Evergreen to expand, but meanwhile, we're just scuffling around, and we're traveling to Seattle and Olympia. Some people even go as far as Portland now.

B: Are you having to? Or are you talking about just the casuals mainly doing that?

W: No, I'm talking about longshoremen. Everyone is traveling. That's what I mean, back in my father's day, they traveled, but after that, when I came on, we didn't travel. People traveled to Tacoma. People came to Tacoma because Tacoma had the work, but now in Tacoma, we don't have the work, everyone else has got it.

B: That's hard to watch. Frustrating, isn't it?

W: Yeah. It's kind of scary. Talking about international economics. How we are just pawns in somebody else's chess board.

B: It's a helplessness, a powerlessness.