Interview: Wayne Mills (WM)
Interviewer: George Davison (GD), Natasha Fairweather (NF)
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Transcription: Cathy Walker

GD [00:00:05] Okay. Thanks, Wayne, for coming in today. My name is George Davison. I am the official interviewer today. We're on the unceded territory of the Lheidli T'enneh. I have a few questions to ask you for the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre, which is doing these interviews of labour leaders that—did you say you're recording them, they're going to go on the website. They'll be transcribed and ultimately they're going to go to SFU to their archives. I've got some biographical questions. I've got some working life questions. I've got some politics at work questions and then some more labour issues questions. We'll start off with what's your full name?

WM [00:00:57] Wayne Edward Mills. I'm an operating engineer, second generation. My son is the third generation. I come out of the building trades. My father and godfather were operating engineers. My grandfather was a carpenter. I have uncles and cousins that were ironworkers and pile drivers. When I grew up, I was in the Operating Engineers, yes.

GD [00:01:23] Where did you grow up?

WM [00:01:23] I grew up in Surrey. When I was 14 or 15, we moved to 100 Mile and I graduated out of Peter Skene Ogden in '76.

GD [00:01:35] That's a high school. Your dad was working there at the time?

WM [00:01:40] Dad actually decided to get out of the Lower Mainland and bought a crane and started a crane outfit just in time for the world to collapse in the 80s.

GD [00:01:50] Good timing.

WM [00:01:51] Yeah.

GD [00:01:55] Was your father a union guy?

WM [00:01:57] Yeah.

GD [00:02:02] Your own family—do you have a wife and kids?

WM [00:02:04] I'm married, got married in '84. I got three children, six grandchildren.

GD [00:02:17] Congratulations. Tell me about how you first got started on the job.

WM [00:02:22] Which job?

GD [00:02:25] Wherever you want to start.

WM [00:02:26] I am a qualified ticketed crane operator. I started in 1979. I had originally gone to Douglas College, decided that wasn't my forte. I went to work in the sawmill in

Ainsworth in 100 Mile. After a year and a bit, my father and godfather said No, come work construction. They got me into the union and my apprenticeship in October of 1979.

GD [00:02:59] That was based in 100 Mile at the time?

WM [00:03:00] No, I worked all over the province. I worked up here, I worked in the Kootenays. I worked all over the place.

GD [00:03:09] What kind of projects were you working on?

WM [00:03:12] In the early '80s it was mostly dams and mines.

GD [00:03:19] Any dams I would know?

WM [00:03:22] The Revelstoke Dam. Worked in there up till it was commissioned in '84, I guess it was.

GD [00:03:29] And mines all over the province?

WM [00:03:32] All over the province. Worked up at Tumbler Ridge.

GD [00:03:37] That was coal?

WM [00:03:40] I worked at a place called — well it's Lornex is what bought it out, Highland Valley Copper. I worked at Line Creek and Green Hills in the Elk Valley.

GD [00:03:56] You talked about training. Was that on-the-job training, mostly?

WM [00:04:00] I went through a course through the union in September of '79, it was six or seven weeks and then after that it was on-the-job training.

GD [00:04:14] What were your responsibilities at work?

WM [00:04:17] I was the apprentice operator and I was the oiler. I was responsible for the cranes.

GD [00:04:25] These are big cranes.

WM [00:04:27] At the time they were big cranes, 100-and-a-quarter and 165-ton machines at the time were big machines. Now they're babies.

GD [00:04:34] Yeah, and they collapse a lot.

WM [00:04:38] Yeah.

GD [00:04:41] Could you share a story from a memorable day at work?

WM [00:04:49] I remember when I was just starting and Doug Penner was the operator and we were at Highmont. I had to move a 125-ton crane with about 150 foot of boom on it and up and around the corner of the concentrator and up the hill. It had snowed and ice and there was very little gravel around and it was slippery and snotty. Dougie said to me, 'Whatever you do, don't touch the brakes and don't try and stop.' Right. Keep her going. I

got going and got up the thing and I was in one gear too high and the machine died. It didn't quite die, but I just couldn't make it so I popped the clutch. Now I'm on a hill and I'm going backwards. I'm in the cab. I'm looking in the windows and I'm keeping it between the snowbank and trying to miss the building.

WM [00:05:53] The operator, Dougie, he's standing on the catwalk and on the upper of the crane.

GD [00:05:59] Waiting for you?

WM [00:05:59] He's watching me. He's on the machine. I'm thinking, come on, Dougie. Bail. As soon as he bails, I'll bail. We get down to the bottom and just about time to go back to the camp and change my shorts, but not quite. We got up, stopped, 'What happened?' 'Started out one gear too high.' Those old machines, the transmission were shifts. He said, 'You did really good.' I said, 'Well, we made it. We didn't crash.' He says, 'Yeah, I was waiting for you to bail.' I said, 'I was waiting for you to bail.' He says, 'If I'd have bailed, what would you have done?' I said, 'I would have been right behind you on the ground.' He says, 'Oh, I guess we were that good. We didn't bail.' Yeah, that was the fun part.

GD [00:06:53] You've talked about these huge cranes. Did the job change over the years?

GD [00:07:02] Yes, when I was starting, it was mostly conventional machines were the big ones. Big hydraulics were just starting to come in. I called them juicers. I was never a hydraulic man. I liked the conventionals. I liked the gears and the torques and transmissions. Just as I was getting out of it, basically the conventionals were getting out. Now it's all hydraulics and some really big hydraulic stuff. When I said get out, it was '95 when I went to work for the union.

GD [00:07:41] Right. So you worked for fifteen, sixteen years on the crane?

GD [00:07:48] Yeah. Sixteen years on the crane.

GD [00:07:53] Tell me about some of the challenges in the industry.

WM [00:07:56] At the time or now?

GD [00:07:57] Well, then and now. What's happened?

WM [00:08:03] It's always been a challenge to find qualified people. I was surprised. The course I went through, there were six of us. I just assumed that we're doing it, we're operators, we're competent, we carried along. I found out about ten years later, that me and one guy made it, and that was quite common. We were a good class. Usually just one guy makes it out of the class for various reasons. I don't know why. Now they've really changed. I was involved when they started, the first time we started doing the Red Seal, countrywide. I helped put that one together. Now the apprenticeship is based on a number of hours of your butt-in-the-seat operating. In B.C., the other provinces have a different group of hours, but it all boils down to the same test. You got to take the same test and you got to be competent. Somebody has to —

GD [00:09:12] How many hours is it?

WM [00:09:14] I believe it's 4,500 hours. And in B.C., B.C. is the only province where you also need to go through B.C. Crane Safe and write their ticket along with the Red Seal. The Red Seal is recognized right across the country in all the provinces. In B.C., when the Red Seal people come, they've then got to write the B.C. Crane Safe ticket.

GD [00:09:45] What's the largest change that you've seen in the industry?

WM [00:09:53] The largest change is the equipment itself is just bigger and stronger. Sometimes when I see some of the lifts they make, it scares me because to run out the long hydraulic boom, it's like having a fly rod. Have you ever done a fly rod? You hold it and all of a sudden you put a five-pound weight on it. What's that fly rod do? When you take a look from a distance on some of those cranes and when they're making their capacity picks, it looks like they're going to come down. Sometimes that does happen because somebody screwed up somewhere.

GD [00:10:35] Yeah, there've been a couple of them.

WM [00:10:37] Yeah.

GD [00:10:40] I used to live in an apartment complex right behind Oakridge. They are rebuilding all of that, re-doing them all and putting ten towers up or something. There was an accident there and a young woman was killed.

WM [00:10:53] Yeah. In those cases, the last couple accidents in the Lower Mainland I've sort of paid attention to have been rigging problems. Not so much the operator and the equipment. It's the guy that's rigging the load up to lift it, once you lift it. When they were doing the KMP job, we couldn't supply people. We brought up, I don't know, a half-dozen people out of the States, various states came up. The difference between them and us is them: the operator is responsible for the load. It's rigged up. You've got to make sure the guy that did it rigged it up properly because you're responsible for it. Coming up out of the States once it hits the hook that's where their responsibility ends. Whoever rigs it up does whatever they want. I think some of that has fallen over on some of the tower crane sites because a lot of American outfits coming up. Right. It's, 'No, don't you worry about it. We got a guy here that'll do it.' The one in Kelowna where those guys got killed, that was just inexperience and no training.

WM [00:12:05] When you watch a qualified like Capel or Tall Crane go in and put up and take down a tower crane, they make it look easy and then the operator will make it look easy if he knows what he's doing. It looks so easy. My opinion is they were trying to save some money and, jeez, we can get the guys here to do it. It cost four people their lives.

GD [00:12:34] You worked as an operator for sixteen years. What was your involvement in the union at that time? What made you jump to a leadership role?

WM [00:12:43] I was always, I don't want to say always a steward, but I was sort of the guy that—one of my operators, as an apprentice, he was the ex- president of the union so part of my apprenticeship under him was, 'Here's the contract, kid. Read it and I'll quiz you on it. You better know what it is, right?' So I did. I got seat time and everything was good. Then he gave me the bylaws. Know the bylaws. He knew his crap. So, same thing and I got more seat time. Then he gave me the constitution. I read halfway through the constitution, and I went to him and I said, 'I guess I'm going to change trades or find a

different operator because this is dry and boring.' He said, 'Well, keep reading it and we'll work on it over the year.' We did.

WM [00:13:32] He got me interested in the union. After that, I was steward on a number of jobs, of pulp mill jobs and mines, and bargaining committees on the pile driving clamshell agreement, whatever it was, '86, '87, I was involved in that. I was involved in picket line incidences where I got to explain to a judge why I did what I did, and then I ended up on various committees of the union, and then the business manager said to me, 'Do you want to go to work?' I said, 'Sure.' He said, 'I've got a job for you up in Prince George.' I said, 'All right, let me think about it.' My wife and kids were all in the East Kootenays at her parents' place, holidaying, summertime. I phoned her up and said, 'I've been offered this job. Think about it. Give me a call back when you (because they were camping) when you get back.' She phoned me a week later and said yeah— when I first talking to her, she says, 'How big is Prince George?' I said, 'About 80,000 people.' She says, 'Well, that's not too bad,' because you got to remember, this is a girl that came out of the Elk Valley, Crowsnest Pass, so very small town. She phoned me a week later, and said, 'If you want to do it, go.' I thought about it some more. We were doing the train from Mission to Vancouver, the West Coast Express. We're doing the things with Fraser River Pile and Dredge. I was on an old piece of junk, and I blew some hydraulic lines and I had to fix them. I was covered in hydraulic line. Every time I fixed one, it would blow another one. It was about the third or fourth one. The pile drivers are helping, but they're not getting all covered in oil and crap.

WM [00:15:50] I said, that makes up my mind. I said, that's enough of this shit. One guy said, 'What are you talking about?' I told him that I was going to go to work for the union. He says, 'You're not very smart. You should have done it a week ago. You don't need this crap.' That's what I did. I moved up here.

GD [00:16:07] What did the work with the union involve?

WM [00:16:10] A lot of negotiations, grievance settlements, organizing.

GD [00:16:16] So 115 is a provincial union, is it not? It covers the whole province?

WM [00:16:19] B.C. and the Yukon Territory.

GD [00:16:22] How many members have you got?

WM [00:16:26] A little better than 13,000.

GD [00:16:33] What was the relationship between you guys and employers in these years?

WM [00:16:43] Some employers there was a good working relationship. There was other employers where it was, we're going to butt heads as soon as we walk into the same building.

GD [00:16:54] Yet those projects had to get done.

WM [00:16:56] They had to get done. Yeah.

GD [00:17:02] Striking. Tell me your experiences about going on strike.

WM [00:17:08] Before I come on staff? We had the big strike in '86. It was during the Alex Fraser Bridge being built. There was an altercation on a picket line in Richmond that I was involved in. That was the one where I had to explain to the judge what happened.

GD [00:17:33] What happened? Obviously, you got off.

WM [00:17:38] Actually, I got a year's probation. What happened was Franki Pile was moving a hammer and was heading to Edmonton. Being young and full of vinegar, I decided it was going to stop. It wasn't coming out of the yard. The tractor-trailer unit pulling it come up to the road. I was standing there. I was walking, but not very far. The driver said, 'I'm not running over him.' The other guy said, 'Get out of there. I'll run over him.' I explained to the gentleman of non-Caucasian background what I was going to do to his head and where I was going to put it. He bounced the truck off me and the front end of his white cab tractor trailer fell off and I got up on the side and he was climbing out the other window. I happened to look over my hip and I saw we were heading to the fence and some other cars, and I stepped off. It was quite a big accident. It was interesting. It was fun. Would I do it again? In a heartbeat.

GD [00:19:10] Negotiations. Tell me about negotiations. How long were the contracts? First of all, were they multiyear?

WM [00:19:18] Some. Most of them were two-to-three-year contracts.

GD [00:19:23] Were there individual contracts on sites or this is an overarching 115 deal with all of the employers?

WM [00:19:32] The cranes—there's a crane rental agreement. It covers the province. There is a heavy construction agreement when you go on to build a site, that covers the province.

WM [00:19:43] Each individual mine such as, God, what the hell's the name of the mine up north of Smithers? They have their own particular one once they're up and running.

GD [00:20:05] So those things they've been negotiated and they just follow the agreement. Were those negotiations to get those agreements easy or difficult?

WM [00:20:14] Most of the mines were a pain and a problem. The crane rental and everything, being in an office up here, we didn't have a lot to do with it other than, they keep us in the loop. When I moved to the coast and my job changed, I got involved more with that type of stuff and I got involved with the CLR and the heavy construction agreement for the province.

GD [00:20:42] In '95, most of the work was local or the North?

WM [00:20:49] For me, from Williams Lake to the North Pole.

GD [00:20:53] What's the North Pole like?

WM [00:20:55] I only got as far as Dawson City to see our two-and-a-half members up there.

GD [00:21:01] Two-and-a-half?

WM [00:21:02] One guy part-time. Half the time.

GD [00:21:11] Negotiations, how long? How did going on strike impact the lives of workers? You were talking about the Alex Fraser Bridge and that strike. How long did it last?

WM [00:21:27] It lasted about a month.

GD [00:21:32] Our strike here was three-and-a-half weeks in '95 in the middle of the winter which was probably the longest strike that there had been in the college sector in years. There's only been a day or two-day shutdown since then, not much inclination to go on strike. How were issues that ended up getting negotiated on the job? How were they raised? Were they safety concerns?

WM [00:22:07] Yeah, safety concerns or we'll call it a grievance that caused the problem because it wasn't clear in the agreement. Two people can read, let's take the Bible. Two people can read the Bible and come up with different answers. That's what happens. I know people always say, well, there's a grey area. Yeah, there's a grey area. Sometimes that works in our favour. Sometimes it doesn't.

GD [00:22:36] There's a grievance stage, obviously. How do they get settled?

WM [00:22:42] Try to settle it, for us, the first step is the member talks to his foreman or supervisor. Next step is gets the steward with him (I'm saying 'him' because I'm a him). The steward tries to settle it with the management (we'll call it) on site, and then the rep gets involved. Keep taking it further up the chain until finally it's at an impasse. Then we call an arbitrator in. We usually have a list of arbitrators both sides agree to. Then go in front of the arbitrator and lawyer. Have fun for a week.

GD [00:23:38] Sometimes it's like a year or two after the initial grievance when an arbitrator gets to hear it and whatever practice the employer has had has been let go for that period. Is it kind of the same in your sector?

WM [00:23:50] We try to move it along a little quicker than that. Ninety days is actually—that's stretching out a long time, right?

GD [00:24:00] So switching from here down to Vancouver, did the job change?

WM [00:24:07] Yes, I went down to Vancouver. There were some retirements and I was asked if I wanted to come down to Vancouver. The assistant business manager at the time, Brian Cochrane, had said to me earlier, when Gary retires, do you want to come down? Will you come down and give me a hand running this organization? I said, yeah, not realizing how quickly things were going to turn.

GD [00:24:36] He left the next day?

WM [00:24:37] No, he didn't, but I came down with a retirement and that was when the world was collapsing down in the States.

GD [00:24:49] 2008.

WM [00:24:52] Yeah. It was interesting. I came back up for a few months and then went back down again, then went from office manager to the superintendent of the reps, one step before the business manager.

GD [00:25:12] There were 30-odd reps or something here in the summer.

WM [00:25:16] Cowboys. Even Leanne, she's a cowgirl.

GD [00:25:24] There are women in the group. You're overseeing all of this.

WM [00:25:29] I was overseeing that. Yeah.

GD [00:25:32] You did that for how long?

WM [00:25:37] 2010 until I retired. It was Ten years, 2020.

GD [00:25:50] You've talked about how you got started in the labour movement, experience organizing workers. Did you have to organize much?

WM [00:25:57] Yep. Kemess, that was the mine up north of Smithers. We went in and that was interesting because we went in, fly-in camp, can't get access to the site. We actually went head-to-head with the Steelworkers and we come out on top, so it was interesting.

GD [00:26:23] You were Labour Council president for a while.

WM [00:26:26] Thank you, Len Nelson. Yes, I was.

GD [00:26:30] That was kind of the mid-2000s.

WM [00:26:33] Yes.

GD [00:26:33] Before you went down.

WM [00:26:34] That was 99, 2000 sometime in there. Yes. Len Nelson was the CLC rep at the time. I don't remember why, one of the truck shops, we were taking them out on strike. I was saying 'Hey guys, any support you can give or come by and visit or whatever, please do so' and Len said to me, 'Why don't you come more often?' I come more often, and the next thing I knew I was president.

GD [00:27:10] I'm thinking mid-90s Mike, the train guy.

WM [00:27:16] I can't remember his name but I can picture him.

GD [00:27:18] Yeah, because we got involved around the strike in '95 and so we were guests of the Labour Council and we joined after that. You also took a stab at running.

WM [00:27:32] It was another one where I shoulda kept walking. People ask me how I did things and I don't really know how I did a lot of things. In my career I just kept doing things that needed to be done and stepped forward. I say to the building trades, that was when the NDP had basically gotten wiped out. They were looking for some candidates to field.

GD [00:27:58] Somebody asked me that year and I said (unclear).

WM [00:28:05] Building Trades had come up from Vancouver. We'd taken them to various sites, we were in the pub up there, just off Northwood Road and talking about who might want to do what. I got up and went to the bathroom and when I come back—

GD [00:28:24] You were the candidate?

WM [00:28:25] I was the candidate. Yeah. I say that. It took a little more than that but that was basically how it got started.

GD [00:28:36] Bob Martin was the one who was trying to rope me in. Bob was a good man. I like Bob.

WM [00:28:44] He's got a little park out there on Ferry Avenue. During the last provincial election when all the conservative signs were there, I said he must be just spinning in his grave.

GD [00:29:00] What was your proudest moment during your time in the labour movement?

WM [00:29:08] One that I was quite proud of was when the provincial government gutted the health care act. We had a big rally up here. Jim Sinclair and a bunch of others came up for it. I'll never forget. We decided to march from the hospital down to the MLA's office. We're getting all ready. We're heading out onto the road and Jim says, 'Have you got the permits?' I said, 'What permits?' 'Well, you need permits for this.' I said, 'No, you don't.' He said, 'We're going to get in trouble.' 'We'll worry about that when we get to the bottom of the hill.'

WM [00:29:48] We got down. As it's getting started, because we slowly move out into the 15th Avenue there. I guess there were some calls to the cops and they showed up. They didn't say anything to us. They just went with their lights ahead of us. They made sure everything was clear and there was no side traffic. That was really cool of them. Apparently I should have contacted somebody ahead of time, but I was never one of those guys.

GD [00:30:16] We had a rally in '03. Our provincial AGM was here and Shirley [Bond] was the Minister of Education, I think, at the time, or Advanced Education. We invited her and of course she didn't come. We were down at the Coast Hotel so we said, 'Well, let's go march up to her office.' I think we did. Somebody handed me a copy of Bill 27, 28, 29, the ones that affected our collective agreements as well. I burned it on the sidewalk in front of her office. I think it happened under the radar so there was nobody around. Nobody got a permit for that.

GD [00:31:05] How do you think the labour movement in B.C. has changed over time?

WM [00:31:19] Trying to think of how to say this politely. It's not as radical as it was when I was growing up. It's, I don't want to say mellowed out, but it's gotten more civilized. Which is good or bad? I don't know. The old days when there used to be rallies, I remember under the Bill 19 days rallying in the Agrodome. There was I don't know how many thousands of us were in there. It was a quite a thing. I remember as a kid my dad and uncles talking in the '60s about a strike they were involved in, and Premier Bennett at the time said he was going to put them all in jail. They said, Yeah, there's 10,000 of us. Which jail are we going to? That was quite militant. The militancy has gotten out of it. There's

probably a lot of reasons. People don't like going to jail as much anymore. Sometimes you can sit and talk and have a cup of coffee and work something out if both sides are willing to work. If they're not, then there's all kinds of neat things to play with.

GD [00:32:45] More general questions. In your opinion, what benefits do unions provide workers?

WM [00:32:52] They provide them with security. I know all through my career, I always heard people say, 'Well, he works for a union. He can't be fired.' No. If you work for the union, you can be fired. It's just your boss has to do it properly. If your boss is lazy or stupid, he's going to keep you working there because he's going to fire you and not do it properly. It's the security of that, security of a pension. I'm enjoying my pension right now and I hope I enjoy it for another 30 years or so. My father was an operating engineer and I grew up with, as I got older, we had dental and medical and everything else. There's a lot of people who don't have a dental plan or a medical plan.

GD [00:33:54] Retiree benefits certainly aren't as nice as they were when I was working.

WM [00:33:57] My retiree benefits, because we're private, not through the public sector, though they cost me 260 bucks a month, they're the same benefits I had when I was working, less disability. There is no long-term or short-term but I've got everything else so they're still pretty good.

GD [00:34:14] Yeah. What do you think is the most important issue facing workers today?

WM [00:34:24] The internet, not so much the gig economy, but people—I belong to various groups and people will ask a question on a Facebook group, we'll call it. Whereas when I was doing it, I'd pick up the phone or I'd go to the hall and ask the rep, what's this? It doesn't make sense to me, people—maybe I was more confrontational because I was raised by building trades people. They were big, rugged, rough and tough.

GD [00:35:04] You deal with stuff face-to-face.

WM [00:35:05] That's right. Going as an operator, going toe to toe with guys in the field and hollering at each other until you worked it out. No fisticuffs or anything, but they came pretty close. I remember as I got into the trade, guys that I've known from this high, coming to the house and visiting my parents, now they're the superintendents and project managers. Sometimes I had problems going and giving George shit because of something he was doing, because I've known George since I was six years old. After a few of those, I lost my shyness.

GD [00:35:56] Why do you think it's important that we commemorate workers in the past? I should bring up, ask about your role in the Workers' Memorial.

WM [00:36:06] Yes, that was with Marty Williams. My mother's father died when she was five. He had a handrail collapse on him, killed him. I had a cousin come down off the Ironworkers', got killed.

GD [00:36:26] On the bridge.

WM [00:36:27] Yeah. My wife's cousin, Westray. He'd gone back there and he'd been talking to his dad about how dangerous it is. His dad was saying, 'Come home. Get out of there.' Coal mine, and he got killed.

WM [00:36:45] Workers shouldn't. You go to work in the morning. You should be expected to come home and see your family or go for a beer with your buddies or whatever. I know just before I got into the office part, I was working for, we were putting the roof on GM Place. I had a loose handrail on my crane. I kept, I'd been working around it because I just couldn't stop the crane. I had to fill out a weekly report and I'd give it to the project manager. Always on the bottom of this was 'This handrail's loose, it needs to get fixed.' He got mad and said, 'Put a line through that,' and said, 'This is now fixed.' He wrote on it, threw it in the thing, and I said, 'When are you going to fix it?' He said, 'We'll fix her at lunchtime.' I went back out there (this was at coffee), I went back out there, did something, went to get out of the crane to talk to the crew, went to get back, the handrail let go, and tore off the end of my finger. He didn't get a chance to fix it, but his ass was in a bind because he said he was fixing it. It was fixed is what he said, so it was interesting.

WM [00:37:58] When you get up in the morning, it doesn't matter if you're going to work in a mine or a construction site or a school or at college or wherever, you have the right to think, I'm going to come home tonight. Safety is the key.

GD [00:38:16] There was always a memorial here for workers who'd been killed on the job but you, I guess when you were at the labour council, decided that there should be a place and a sculpture.

WM [00:38:29] That's right. The sculpture. We got various unions to donate. I went around and beat up some contractors and got them to donate. Some of the other building trades got their contractors to donate. It worked out. It came together really nice. I was concerned where it was for two facts, because of the area and being metal, I thought, sure as hell it's going to go down to the junkyard, middle of the night.

GD [00:39:00] It's still there.

WM [00:39:00] Yeah. Years later, it's still there. It's great.

GD [00:39:04] I was out a couple of years ago when the flags had deteriorated. I said something to somebody, and I see they've all been replaced with fresh new signs. April 28th.

GD [00:39:18] Last couple of questions are why does labour history matter to you?

WM [00:39:25] If you forget where you come from or you forget the battles and fights you're going to have to do them all again if you aren't prepared for what has happened. I see a lot of that in 'right to work' states where there'll be 300 people on the job and be two union people. Everybody's piggybacking off those two guys. It's not good. A lot of times when somebody gets killed, it's because somebody forgot about safety. If the unions aren't around, there's no safety.

GD [00:40:14] What's one thing you wish young workers understood about labour history? Kind of, 'Don't forget it.'

WM [00:40:21] CLAC is a bunch of ratbag bastards (laughter). Sorry. You'll probably cut that out.

Natasha Fairweather [00:40:32] Talk more about that.

WM [00:40:33] CLAC has screwed up the labour industry since I started paying attention to it in the early 80s. CLAC started getting really good. By them doing what they did they cost the building trades a lot of strength. Part of that is our own doing because, just leave those little contractors alone. All of a sudden, the little contractors get some money behind them and they buy some bigger contractors.

GD [00:41:10] What percentage of the industry is CLAC?

WM [00:41:14] In construction? God, it's got to be at least 40%. It's really, really tough. I'm talking more road building, heavy equipment. In house building and condos and that sort of thing, it's probably closer to 95%. Some trades that are still very strong are the UA, the Plumbers and Pipefitters, electricians, very strong but the other trades have been gobbled up by CLAC. They won't like that when I say that.

NF [00:41:57] I can cut it if you want me to.

WM [00:41:58] No, no, I don't like people, so I don't need friends (laughter).

GD [00:42:10] We found this old picture of you and a more recent picture. I don't even know what year this was. 'Brandt Tractor walks off the job.' This is from '98: 'Union attempts to organize mine from airport parking lot in town.'

WM [00:42:33] That was Kemess in Smithers.

GD [00:42:34] Yeah. Interior news, 1998, there's a picture of you.

WM [00:42:38] Me and Herb Conat and Rob Brady and my old pickup.

NF [00:42:45] What's that story? Why were you in an airport parking lot?

WM [00:42:49] Because it was a fly-in camp. The only way to get at it was fly in, and they only flew in on certain days. Every Wednesday there was a group of mine ops or mine maintenance were flying in and we had to be there to talk to them. That was interesting. I remember one guy coming off the plane and just grinding the hell out of me because the Steelworkers weren't there. I said, 'Well, I'll tell you what pub they're in. Since it's noon they'll be in the Alpine pub.' I talked to him after the organizing and when we talked he said, 'Yeah, I was just mad that you were there and they weren't.' I said, 'Well, nothing I can do about that.'

GD [00:43:37] A lot of these industries are fly-in, fly-out now. The pipeline that went across had these big construction camps that lasted for about a year, I guess, where hundreds of guys would be there and then they're not. My son's involved in nondestructive testing.

WM [00:44:05] Oh yes, NDT.

GD [00:44:08] All over, so he's been up to the mine north of Hyder. He's now working down at the new Blackwater gold mine. They're getting ready to get going and they're

testing the welds there. Outside of Fort St James and down in Merritt, there are plants, biofuel plants. He's done some work there. A lot of those workers are in-and-out.

NF [00:44:42] That must make it hard to organize workers.

WM [00:44:44] It is very hard. Yeah. In the old days where people went right there and you had access to it. These planes, planes were always scary and they're still scary. When you had access to the things, it was easier.

GD [00:45:05] That airport in Smithers is pretty big.

WM [00:45:07] It's getting bigger now. It wasn't in '98.

GD [00:45:17] Is there anything else you want to ask?

NF [00:45:21] What have we not asked about? Can you think of anything, any more stories?

WM [00:45:30] You were talking about the NDP. My wife was pregnant with my son, so then about 89, 90. I was working for Interior Power and Chemical, then went over to Crofton and took the crane over. We're putting the tank together, stainless tank, slow because as you're building the tank, they've got to weld it and test everything. Me, I'm not doing a whole lot because there wasn't a lot to do other than hold the piece, then cut it loose when it's in place, put another piece up. The GF being quite friendly, Grant and me were riding together because we were only working five days a week, so ferry back and forth with each other. He'd got permission from the Boilermakers to weld (that was his trade), because they couldn't supply guys. They were bringing them from all over. I remember one guy coming out of Prince Albert who was quite a character. Grant had the permission of whoever can weld, let him weld, we'll straighten it out. Get the frickin' job finished. I'm sitting there. One of my mum's uncles was a blacksmith by trade, but he was also a superintendent with Dominion Bridge, a welding superintendent. He taught me as a kid how to blacksmith and how to weld. I always remember him. I was about 15. I was welding something but I had a whole mess of grapes on it, and it was just bothering the hell out of me. He says, 'Let me show you a trick, kid.' He grabbed the grinder and ground it all off and then grabbed spray paint and spray painted over top of it. He says, 'Now, can you tell if you welded it or I welded it?' The difference between a good welder and a bad one is a can of paint and a grinder. I always say that to my welder buddies. It annoys the hell out of them.

WM [00:47:35] On this job in Crofton, they had a gas weld, like wire feed gas because it was stainless. I said let me try because I've never tried that before. He said, go ahead. I'd seen some guys where they tried welding this thing and the tester came up and he'd just pull it out with his pliers because it didn't bite right. I welded about three feet. It was pretty cool and it didn't look half bad. I went to get a grinder and the tester guy said, 'Well, no, I'll test it first.' He tested it and by goddamn, it passed. It was good. I said, 'Right on'. Grant says, 'Well, go weld that part.' I said, 'Screw you. I did it once.' It's perfect right now. I'm staying that way.'

GD [00:48:34] You didn't need any black paint.

WM [00:48:35] No. Didn't need any paint. Didn't need to grind it off, but it was fun.

NF [00:48:43] Did you say that you have a son who is an operating engineer? Is he involved in the union at all?

WM [00:48:48] No. He's a smart kid, watching his dad. He's a plant operator. He's pretty good at his trade. He's a big boy, not quite as tall as me, but he's got his grandpa's temper, so he doesn't play well with others. I said, 'You don't need to as the operator. You just close your door and make them go away.' That was when COVID hit. I had to talk a lot of my buddies, like they're all in their 60s now, but you know, we're all coming towards the end of our trade and we all grew up and we all did all this. I kept saying, 'You're a crane operator, you've got it built.' 'What do you mean?' 'Get out of your car, walk to your crane, close the door, do your job. Don't go to the shack. If they come, tell them to talk real loud because you're not opening the goddamn door and if they don't like that, tell them to fuck off.'

GD [00:49:51] Stay healthy, yeah.

WM [00:49:52] Yeah. Some of them after that said, that was the best advice we could get because they were scared to go to work because they didn't want to get sick.

NF [00:50:04] When you retired, your union did a big profile on you in the magazine.

WM [00:50:08] I remember that. Yeah.

NF [00:50:09] How was that?

WM [00:50:11] It was all right. This was Brian's report. It was after I'd retired, actually, but because I'd given an 'Adios my friends' report.

GD [00:50:27] Brian's still going strong.

WM [00:50:28] Yeah. No, he's retiring in March.

GD [00:50:30] Is he? Really?

WM [00:50:33] Yeah. He's retiring in March. Brian Railton, did you ever know Lionel, his dad?

GD [00:50:42] No.

WM [00:50:43] Brian is going to become the next business manager. The executive board's made a decision. Brian is the third generation operating engineer. No, actually, Brian's the fourth generation.

GD [00:50:58] It's in the blood.

WM [00:50:59] I guess so, yeah.

GD [00:51:02] Well, this has been great.

WM [00:51:04] Okay. Well, thank you. Still haven't had coffee with you (laughter).