

# Bert Hall

Interviewer: David Jelliffe

Tape No. 9

FULL TRANSCRIPTION OF TAPE - NO RESTRICTIONS

---

BH: February 9, the day I went camping on No. 6 Road a number of years up there.

INT: You went to school at the...

BH: I went to Mitchell School over there at Bridgeport and later years I spent eighteen and a half years at Beaver and saw mills. I was in charge of two saw mills.

INT: Oh really.

BH: Yup.

INT: Even saw mills over on the...

BH: Vancouver side, across the Sea Island Bridge and then I, in '42 I joined the B.C. Electric and worked for them as motorman and railroad engineer.

INT: Now um, when you were going to Mitchell School from where you were living over here on 6th and Cambie.

BH: Down a mile at Fraser Avenue, the school was on the corner of Fraser and Cambie.

INT: Right, you walked down and took your lunch?

BH: Oh sure, too far to walk back, we always took our lunch with us to school.

INT: When you were a boy did they have lots of or did they have any festivals?

BH: Yes, quite a few, Oh yeah, I ... strawberry festivals, lots of picnics, like Sunday School picnics and things like that. Oh sometimes we went to Stanley park or Bowen Island or sometimes right here on the Island we had some wonderful picnics. We had a big picnic one year, the Blair picnic out on No. 3 Road, all the Blairs and there was one hundred some odd there in them days, but whether they would be there now..., we all got together, you see my wife was a Blair.

INT: Oh, I see.

BH: Sure, you know Archie Blair? that's her cousin...

INT: So um I was talking with one of the first Municipal nurses out here, but this was after your time, her name was Miss Upshall and she was here in 1936 so you were gone then?

BH: Sure, but I heard the name.

INT: She was here about a year down in Brighthouse mostly. Now when you were a boy did the doctors come around the school at all?

BH: Oh yes, we had the doctors, Dr. Hepworth, a Dr. Hall and all the doctors used to come to the schools once or twice a year.

INT: Just to see that the...

BH: Yeah, just to see if everything was fine, sure.

INT: Did they have truant officers ... those play hookey?

BH: No, no they didn't.

INT: I suppose because it was small then, everyone new all the children.

BH: Oh knew everybody sure. I used to know everyone from Marpole Bridges to Queensborough but I couldn't say that today. No, no I used to know them all.

INT: At that time particularly in this section as you lived in this section a number of years, was there a policeman down in that area?

BH: Yes, we had a policeman in that area by the name of Mr. Edwards. He was from the foot of Frase St. for a few years and his family went to school with me and then in later years were usually just the two on the Island Chief Waddell and Sid ... what was the policeman's name ... Young, and then Alfie Johnson took over. They had different fellows on the police force that I knew.

INT: Because I understand in those days they had a jail down here in Steveston and it was a pretty rough section.

BH: Austin Harris was the chief of police one time for awhile.

INT: ... and up the other end they had another jail up here in Brighthouse

BH: At the municipal hall, I think, i never got a chance to see it, or any of them places [laughter]

INT: Then I understand on the Island the rough part of town was down in Steveston?

BH: Yes.

INT: So it was relatively quiet up where you were?

BH: Oh yeah, there were farmers and everything, it was pretty peaceful and fun. I used to enjoy the last trip in to Steveston with the tram Saturday night you looked three ways, that was the only you could look, three different ways you could see three fights going on at the same time.

INT: No kidding.

BH: Yeah.

INT: When you're driving the tram?

BH: Yeah, Saturday night was sometimes just all be getting out, fights going all over, lots of fun.

INT: This was Saturday night?

BH: The last run, no, no, no, not the last run but Saturday nights when we would come out of Steveston at 12:00 at night. It was the last trip into Steveston 12:00 at night.

INT: Well did many of the people who worked in Steveston, they got paid on Saturday, would they go into Vancouver and spend their money?

BH: Some would, not too many, oh yeah we'd bring out a two car load out as a rule every Saturday night the last trip people would go shows and they would catch the last tram out.

INT: I understand right at the turn of the century there were a number of hotels down in Steveston and drinking and a little bit of prostitution and gambling and things like that.

BH: Sure.

INT: When did that start to fade?

BH: Oh,

INT: Because you know today there is nothing down there.

BH: I uh, guess fifteen, ten years ago, ... Steveston started to change. There was two fires and cleaned out so much of the City and all ... Steveston had some terrible fires and the canneries and everything else gone. All up in smoke.

INT: It seems to me if the CP had got this track in and then B.C. Electric ran the cars down you'd think that they would have some sort of fire engine car? But they never did

BH: No, no. Later years they had the fire hall in Steveston the night the trolley wires fell on me in a snow storm out in Steveston and set one of my trams on fire. We had the Steveston Fire Department down there and they thought we couldn't get the wire off the back tram, it was wrapped around the whistle and it was setting the tram all on fire and so [INAUDIBLE for approx. 1 second] sent a train from Marpole out to pull me off the live wire. They managed to get the front wire off the front of the tram and but still all the lights would come on and the bumps would start up and the whole thing was alive. We got all the passengers off the tram that night without anybody getting hurt so I made them all jump off ... I didn't want to hang on the handles and the steps and touch the ground at the same time. I made them all jump with their hands around their side and shoulders jump off, which I did myself and nobody got hurt.

INT: There was no way in those days of shutting off the power you know...

BH: ... At that time they already put in that little automatic sub-station out there at McCallum and it would take off and run slam back in until they powered back at us and it would take longer to have men go out and cut that station out than it would to send the tram out to Marpole to pull us out. We had an exciting time there for a half hour but a few months later I was driving the same tram again ... fixed her all up ... at the car barns

INT: The car barns are down on Davie?

BH: No, down in Kitsilano and New Westminster, we had the big car barns at Westminster at the foot of 12th Street and the other car barns down in Kitsilano.

INT: This is where they did the repairs and painting?

BH: Painting they had the painting shop down in Kitsilano and done most of the painting, the light repairs, well, and most of the heavy repairs were done at the Kitsilano barns.

INT: So when do you remember the first automobiles coming to Richmond?

BH: Well the ...

INT: You were talking about the planked roads and the cars had to make way for the wagons?

BH: I think the first automobile that was up here that belonged to anyone up in the east end of the Island where I lived was Sam Mitchell. They had a little Franklin. A little round barrel engine in the front and I guess it was a four cylinder, but the frame work was instead of being steel like our automobiles are today, it was an old plane. I drove a lot.

INT: I suppose when the cars first came over, young people were very interested in them?

BH: Oh yes they were.. They wouldn't have to hitch up the horse and buggy.

INT: No, just jump in ... what was the feeling of some of the older people?

BH: Well a lot of the old people when they started to bring out cars with too much glass on them they were scared of them. They were scared if they got in an accident the glass would fly and cut them. It wasn't shatter proof glass like they have today I guess it was just ordinary window pane which would give you a bad cut if there was an accident. A lot of people didn't like the Sedans and the cars at the start because they were scared of the glass, but I know the old ones with the canvas tops and the [ ], they were pretty cool things to ride in. You had to add hot water jugs and all the rest of it, but that didn't bother us, we went just the same.

INT: So um I understand that when Richmond, or rather Brighouse first started getting a fire department together on some sort of regular basis they converted a truck, a gasoline-driven truck, and they put a tank on it?

BH: I believe so, yes. Charlie McCullough was one of the first ones to drive it and then they got some better ones and

they all nearly volunteered for years you know the fire department was ...

INT: They didn't have a bell to call the people? Or did some people hang around the fire place

BH: Well, Charlie McCullough lived right where the engine was kept at the municipal hall at Brighthouse and each dialed out and the rest of them would jump in cars and follow him and catch up with him.

INT: Was there whistles or bells...

BH: Well I believe there was a siren like on the truck and they phoned all the volunteers to tell them where to go.

INT: So when you were a boy they didn't have electricity?

BH: No, when I was out in East Richmond we never had electricity, we never had water for years. We had to haul our own water from Marpole and drinking water from the springs up there and which was very nice water but we had to use Alladin lamps and all the rest of it for light, lanterns.

INT: So when the electricity first came in was it expensive?

BH: No I don't think so, no, not bad at all. We got the phone in in later years, I guess I was twenty years old or maybe eighteen or so when we got a telephone.

INT: When you were working with the saw mills?

BH: I started yes, and I can't remember the year but I put in eighteen and a half years at the Eburne saw mills. I was ... before that.

INT: So this is after World War I?

BH: Yes.

INT: So at that time when you first started at the saw mill what were you paid?

BH: Well, I started off at the first day I started off at \$.40 a day \$0.40 an hour, but I was only there a day when they come along and they said they were going to raise your wages, we're going to give you \$0.60 and I thought that was pretty nice to get a raise the first day. We never did make big wages in those days at the mill but we put in lots of hours. I used to, if I didn't have 330 hours or more a month on my time sheet, I checked back to see where I had been. Lots of times in the winter time I never saw my own home in daylight for maybe three or four months at a time, seven days a week, but one day of the year I had to have a holiday and that was Christmas day. I wouldn't go in on Christmas Day.

INT: So the sawmill was going all the time?

BH: Oh yeah, we were repairing all the time to keep the saw mill going. That was my job to keep all them wheels running ... and they built another saw mill beside the big one which was a gunshot (?) feed carriage mill, a dandy mill, so I was in charge of the two sawmills.

INT: At that time were there, you know, today they have all sorts of accident prevention and accident committees ...

BH: Sure, first aid committees.

INT: What did they have then?

BH: Well it was just up to us fellows to watch and guard things and see that anywheres we saw danger we would try and prevent it by putting guards up or something like that. If we saw anybody doing anything that was dangerous we would ... I generally spoke to them. Tell them to stop.

INT: Did you have any serious accidents like a man being chopped in half?

BH: Yes, one night at the planing mill, the planing mill there, I was running the mill and we had a fellow all torn to pieces in the planing mill. He went to put a belt on with his foot on a live pulley and he missed and the belt wrapped up on the line shaft up in the ceiling. We had a bad accident. But ... all the years I was millwrighting I didn't have an

accident because I had everything guarded. And I watched and if I saw anybody doing anything wrong I'd talk to him about it. Speak to him, tell him to watch what they were doing.

INT: So that was just that one accident?

BH: The one accident when I was there. But they had accidents after I left, I don't know why, I had everything guarded there after I quit, but there shouldn't have been any accidents. I believe a couple of men went up in the big sawdust bin and a truck came in at the same time and when they were levelling sawdust off and they pulled the gate at the bottom and that's how they got smothered, they went down in the big bins and I believe they lost two men after I left because I had everything guarded with belts I would put them around a rope and a man to stand up there with the ropes to hold them in case something did happen I warned them never to go in that bin unless there was two men and one with the belt and a guard there to watch him. Even had a pipe right down the centre so as if anything happened you could even get the pipe when it was hanging I couldn't see the pipe could grab it and if anything happened they could help hold themselves from going down with the sawdust but what happened I really couldn't say. After I left I heard that they had a couple of bad accidents. And on the road when I was there we never had no bad accidents on the railroad. I had a couple of fellows from Steveston one night and they were partying it up a little, they drove into the side of me at Branscombe. I believe they got over it, I saw one fellow three months later, but he was still on crutches, the other fellow wasn't able...

INT: This was a car accident?

BH: Yeah a car accident.

INT: So, that was about the rate then, just after WW I, up to about a dollar?

BH: Yeah, when I quit that mill, I was getting about a dollar. Then I went on the B.C. Electric and I took a cut to start off with. I wanted to get away from milling. I'd been at it for eighteen years and I never had a minute to myself I couldn't even go home and have my supper, unless I was called out, you see...

INT: How old were you when you started? Twenty?

BH: Oh let's see, I was doing carpenter work for a few years, guess I would be about twenty-three.

INT: Eighteen years there, ... and then you started ...

BH: Yes, after being there eighteen and a half years. I just got fed up with the being inside and never having a minute to myself, and the long hours, dark to dark.

INT: Did you get what they have now, overtime?

BH: No, no, no, no, stay time was the only time, then I went to B.C. Electric and then we got overtime and then after eight hours we got triple time see and it was a much better job, clean job. Before, I could walk down the street of Marpole and I could meet my best friend and he would walk right by me, he wouldn't know me for grease and dirt. I enjoyed every minute of it though. With the two mills running and every wheel turning at one time, that was a big job with every part moving. Well, now and again it would fail me and I'd have to make repairs you know, making something, we would make most of our own equipment too, anything we could make we made down there even making our own sawdust machine to make sawdust, because a lot of people burned sawdust in those days.

INT: You were taking the raw logs?

BH: Yeah, the raw logs.

INT: You were transforming it in the mill into planks and 2 x 4's?

BH: 2 x 4's, shiplap siding and window casing, door stock and moldings of all kinds. The machine would making something different beautiful lumber all grains, most beautiful stuff you ever saw.

INT: As long as you had logs in the river, did you ever get ahead of the logs?

BH: No, as a rule, we always had logs to saw, oh one time or two or three times when the river froze from Marpole right to say Westminster, we had to blast the logs out of the river to get them into the mill. Sometimes they would come up with chunks of ice on them, two or three hundred pounds of ice chunks stuck to them then we would try and

get it on the conveyor so as not to go into the boiler room to put the fires out, keep steam up. And the mill was run with big 1100 horsepower steam engine I run it many a day, beautiful big engine, run perfect. They had a sixteen foot fly wheel, six feet wide with a five foot leather belt on it 99 feet six inches long, now how many hides, how many beef would it take to make a big belt and that's only the best of the back of the hide would be used to go in that belt, none of the side, just the strip of the back, maybe two feet wide, three-ply leather which would be about 7/8 of an inch thick.

INT: At that time were there any parts, you said they made as much as they could there, but were there any vital things that you would have to send back East for?

BH: Yes, when the war was on we had to order our conveyor belt and a lot of material like that one year ahead of time. We had to figure out and see that our conveyor belt would last for one year before they would allow us to put in an order ahead of time to stock pile anything. We couldn't order ahead and we had to have our belting and everything shipped. Many a time we just got it in in time too.

INT: It came by rail?

BH: Oh yes, it come in by rail. Conveyor belting and all that, it was made down East somewhere, I couldn't say where, especially our big rubber conveyor belting ...

INT: But generally, now I'm thinking again back on Lulu Island when you were a boy and you saw how the men fixed something around the farm, they made do with what they had right? It wasn't a question of running out and buying stuff.

BH: No, you couldn't. You could if you had the money to do it with, but you take and repair binders and mowers and get new bearings to put in. You made every bit of machinery to make sure it lasted, well oiled and take care of it, because machinery is hard to get.

INT: So they were made to last in those days, those machines?

BH: Oh yes, so long as you kept them up.

INT: Your father had a little farm?

BH: Yeah, the corner of six and Cambie, 30 acre farm there for years.

INT: Now I understand that it was the practice then that if the people were growing grain, that once a year a fellow would come around with thresher?

BH: Oh yes, I worked many a year, well not many, I guess maybe four or five years I worked on the big threshing engines and would haul the water to the [ ] and worked on the engine there were quite a few big steam threshers going.

INT: They were on wagons and pulled by horses I understand?

BH: No steam tractors. They went on their own power. Some of the first ones they didn't have a steering apparatus so they were steered by horses, not pulled by horses, but the others were self-propelled I guess one of them engines weighed ten ton or more or fifteen ton. So you had to have good bridges for them to go across

INT: So these things just drove down the road from farm to farm?

BH: Yup, pull the separator behind them.

INT: You were saying that you had to supply the water and the wood?

BH: And the wood or coal, whatever you wanted.

INT: And so each farmer had to provide his own fuel?

BH: Yes, and the water and feed all the men.

INT: And feed the men?

BH: Sure, many a time I heard my dad walk in and say to my mother maybe 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, why you'll have eighteen men for supper!

INT: She had to hustle around make a lot of food.

BH: Set a table for eighteen men to sit down to, yeah.

INT: And you still had to pay them? And you paid the man who owned the thresher?

BH: Oh yeah, so much, I believe so much a ton for threshing. I forget just how much.

INT: So then if you wanted the thresher and the men, you had to provide the fuel, the water, the food and pay them on top of of that?

BH: Sure, quite a deal in them days ...

INT: Did the Chinese work on the thresher?

BH: Not too many. I had seen the odd one work on the thresher, but not too many. Generally all white men on them, some from Vancouver and different places. Generally the engineer, mostly the owner of the machine, he had the ticket, steam ticket and he'd be the engineer and some friend or someone he knew would be the separator man, look after the separator, like the millwright, you see, like looking after the milling machine.

INT: Now I understand that building some of the roads through the bog they had to lay a foundation and they used to take the ballast rocks from some of the boats?

BH: Yes, big rocks they put in the bottom ... course gravel was generally what they put on the bottom of these roads [ ] the foot of No. 6 Road and the north arm and haul gravel way up Westminster Highway.

INT: Where did you get the gravel from?

BH: Came in on scows.

INT: Oh so then there were no rocks?

BH: Oh no, there wasn't a rock in Richmond, the only rock in Richmond if you find one anywheres, it floated in on the stump of a tree at one time or something like that, all the rock in Richmond was brought in by power somehow. Yup, no rocks in Richmond.

INT: I noticed out here on Iona Island, there's some big rocks out there, they were brought in too?

BH: All brought in by scow, they brought 'em in and come right down here in the little channel in between Iona Island and went up to where they got the causeway, and built the causeway through and then they built the jetty going out from the island, out in the sea-way out there into the Gulf there, I guess it goes out about a mile and a half.

INT: So when they were originally building the roads in Lulu Island proper, they had teams of horses, and I guess ...

BH: Yes, years ago it was all horse work.

INT: Yes, and just driving the gravel and the rock and stones and everything like that to lay the foundation for the road ...

BH: Our wagons used to be like 4 x 4 bottom in them, and you could get one 4 x 4 out and then the gravel would fall down you see, and you keep moving them, and the man working on the road, of course the [ ] he wouldn't do nothing like that, he'd keep moving the team and move them up.

INT: So they dumped it right through the bottom, by shifting ...

BH: ... shifting the floor in the bottom of the wagon. I forgot how many yards they used to take, not too many 'cuz it's pretty heavy stuff, gravel is quite a weight. So, on the wagon, with the teams ...

INT: They didn't put any piles into the roads?

BH: No, but the railroad in between say Boundary Road and Trapp Road, that's going right through the bog, they put an awful lot of timber and, um, big rocks and everything in that road. The time we had the circus here on Sea Island, Barnum and Bailey Circus, they unloaded at Marpole and come across the Marpole Bridge with all their equipment. The train coming down was so heavy it pushed all the ties on the railroad, I forget now whether it was six inches or eight inches or something, that pushed going up hill all the time. Going back you'd shove them all back into place in those days the rails were light they weren't the heavy rails we have today and I think most of us ran a sixty-five pound rail and it was too light to bring a train that weight over but nothing happened it'd go across alright.

INT: A sixty-five pound rail was okay for the B.C. Electric?

BH: It wasn't even good enough for the B.C. Electric to run on it would give with you so easy you know underneath where, when we got the heavier steel, in the 100 pound steel and 110 pound steel, why the interurbans straightened out and run twice as good [ ] cause they had to have it for the big diesels, diesels weigh ahh, I think its 90 tons?

INT: Ninety ton?

BH: Ninety ton? Boy, that is some weight, Yah I think it's 90, the smaller ones weigh 78, and 90 ton. This big new engine they have today they just got in a couple of months ago, it weighs a hundred and ninety tons.

INT: Really, so when you first started working on the B.C. Electric then they had the 110 pound or 100 pound rail?

BH: Oh no, on the start they didn't, they had the lighter rail. Eight-five and oh [ ] then they put in the heavier rail later on.

INT: Did they stop all the traffic and start re-laying rail?

BH: No, no they, they have the rail all ready and take a section out and slide it over and couple of guys, a couple of spikes, never held us up at all. No, they changed rail on the railroad without stopping, interfering traffic on the rail.

INT: They had tie plates?

BH: Oh yes. In them days they didn't have tie plates, but now they have them nearly all the roads.

INT: So then the railroad spike with a little hook on it ...

BH: ... held the rail right down originally, but now it goes through the plate too with a square hole through the plate and the rail sits on the tie plate, protects, ... and maybe three times the width of a rail and that puts more weight on, distributes the weight so it doesn't cut into the tie.

INT: I suppose they had a gang working down there?

BH: On the tracks? Oh yes, we had different sections. Lulu Island section and had the Marpole section, we had the parts men down from 16th Avenue in around Granville Island down underneath Cambie Street Bridge then we had another section line the fellows at Marpole went as far as Fraser Street, I believe and then the other crew at Dominion Mills would work from Fraser Street to 16th garage, and there they had more section men in the 16th yard, and then they had the Fraser Valley men, two or three sections going up the Fraser Valley that they looked after.

INT: So then the Lulu Island men just had to be responsible for a certain length of track.

BH: Yes, a certain length of track, looking after it and the switches and all that.

INT: So they always had something to do?

BH: Oh, keeping the brush cut, the weeds, and changing broken rails, fixing switches and it was never ending. It was an endless job, you know, you never ran out of a job.

INT: They had this electric wire, a single wire running above the track, trolley, were there any birds ...

BH: No, a bird could sit on that live wire and sit there all day and wouldn't get hurt. I could go up on a tram and grab hold of that live wire and never get a tingle. I could go up and grab the trolley pole and put on the rail as long as you don't step on the ground and touch it. Because the roof of the tram is all insulated, wooden box cars is fine, but don't



stand on the steel box cars and try it, you wouldn't last long.

INT: So then with this electric line there weren't any accidents, children couldn't get at it or anything like that?

BH: No, not very well. I turned on the Granville Street Bridge one time the old Granville Street Bridge and as the interurban turned the curve off of 4th Avenue to turn onto the Granville Street Bridge it must of pulled on a control wire underneath and touched the side of the casing where I was holding the handbrake and the controller. When I woke up I was pretty near over Granville Street Bridge!

INT: No kidding, knocked you straight over?

BH: Knocked be me cold. When I came to I was going through the swing it was a good thing the bridge was in line for me and all the traffic on the Granville Street Bridge, never touched a sole, and one good thing I only had it on two notches, I didn't have it opened up , of course we didn't on Granville Street Bridge anyway but, it was just on the second notch when it hit me and I ... so I got up in a daze I took over the ... handle on the controller and took the wooden handle on the brake valve and made sure I didn't touch anything else. I trickled into Davie Street and phoned for a new train and I took that back across the Granville Street Bridge and turned it into the barn and told them to get busy and find the short in that thing. I never been hit so hard in all my life. Boy, 550 volts, sure made the sparks fly! It knocked me right out for maybe three, four minutes.

INT: Meanwhile the tram was going right along ... no one else knew about it?

BH: Nobody knew anything about it. You see, up in the cab of a tram or a cab of a freight, or anything like that, that's where it takes the two men. Yes, something happens to the man on the controls, some of them have dead men control, some of the steam cars have, but the interurban didn't have. There's where, they should have had two men, you never knew what was going to happen to the fellow up there. So, but railroad, railroad trains, should have two men up front for safety and all that.

INT: When you first worked with the B.C. Electric was there a union?

BH: Uh, no not so much ... that developed slowly. We did belong to the [ ] ... of Railroad Engineers. I worked on that, we belonged to the [ ] and the conductors belonged to the O.R.C., which is the Order of Conductors.

INT: And that just developed from there?

BH: Oh, they had it before I went. It improved on the line over the years to come. Everything worked out pretty nice. I generally [enjoyed years] B.C. Electric and Hydro.

END OF INTERVIEW