

Name: Interview with Frank Brown
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AMPE: I just want to start by asking you a couple biographical questions.

BROWN: Oh, okay.

AMPE: So the first one is, what was the date of your birth?

BROWN: December 17, 1915.

AMPE: Where were you born?

BROWN: Tumwater, Washington.

AMPE: What education or work background did you have?

BROWN: I finished high school, I graduated Whatcom High School, and I went to work Puget Sound Pulp and Timber [which became Georgia Pacific] right after school.

AMPE: What were the positions that you held at pulp and timber mill?

BROWN: What?

AMPE: What positions did you...

BROWN: Oh, I went to work as a laborer then I went in into the maintenance department and became a maintenance mechanic and welder. I was a journeyman welder most of my time there.

AMPE: Alright, great. How would you characterize your family background?

BROWN: Oh, we grew up in small town. I had nine brothers and sisters and had [a] happy, pretty simple life. My dad was a machinist and later become a master mechanic at the pulp mill, and we had a good life.

AMPE: How did you move... when did you move Bellingham?

BROWN: In 1929, May 1929.

AMPE: Why did you come here?

BROWN: My dad's job changed. He, at that time... became a master mechanic at the Puget Sound Pulp and Timber Pulp Mill. He had been machinist in Tum... Olympia, Washington and we lived in Tumwater during that period.

AMPE: Was religion or ethnicity important to your family?

BROWN: What?

AMPE: Was religion or ethnicity important to your family?

BROWN: Oh, my wife and I belonged to the Presbyterian Church and were fairly active in church activities.

AMPE: What was your childhood like?

BROWN: Real good. We were, [you] might say, poor, but we seemed... [like] a happy family. I became a paper boy when I was real young so [I] delivered paper[s] for several years. We're a large family so we kind of earned our own way.

AMPE: How old were your older brothers and sisters, or were they younger brothers and sisters?

BROWN: I had two older sisters and then I was the oldest boy of six. I had three younger sisters.

AMPE: Do they still live in Bellingham?

BROWN: One of my younger sisters lives in Bellingham and the other one lives in Seattle, and my older sisters are gone. Most of my brothers... none of my brothers live in Bellingham. One of them is in Portland, Oregon, another one is in... back in Minnesota.

AMPE: What was Bellingham like when you were growing up?

BROWN: It wasn't a lot different then it is now. Of course, it's grown a lot and changed a lot, but it was just a typical small city like it is now. Although the city hasn't changed a lot the county has. The county [is] where the growth has all been, out north of Bellingham mainly.

AMPE: What was your neighborhood like?

BROWN: We... lived off Sunset Drive just off of Cornwall and near Cornwall Park. When we first moved to Bellingham... it was nice neighborhood and then I lived at home after [I] graduated high school. After I went to work for a few years... we lived over on East [Hicklor?] Street on the other side of Cornwall Avenue. Good neighborhood.

AMPE: What was your favorite place in the city when you were growing up?

BROWN: Probably Cornwall Park where we spent a lot of time playing.

AMPE: Did you play with your brothers and sisters?

BROWN: What?

AMPE: Did you play with your brothers and sisters?

BROWN: Yeah

AMPE: Yeah [laughing]. What educational work experience did you have before you came to the pulp and timber mill?

BROWN: Oh, just delivering the *Bellingham Herald*. One year I was the top *Bellingham Herald* Carrier and I went on and went to work the summer of '33. Well, I was still in high school at the pulp mill and work[ed] as a laborer that summer, [then] went back to school and when I graduated in June '34 I went to work at the pulp mill and I was there the rest of my work life.

AMPE: What were the biggest things that affected you when you were a child?

BROWN: Probably as a... when I was real young I could even remember the end of World War I and I was just about three years old at the time. And, I don't know, just... living in a large family and having good relationships with my brothers and sisters. And working and earning my own way.

AMPE: What made you stay in Bellingham?

BROWN: Oh, the fact that I went to work at the pulp mill and then [in] 1938 I married my wife who was... at that time she lived in Marysville but she was a student up at Western and we... had a good job. We started up family here and just never left.

AMPE: What was the waterfront like?

BROWN: Oh, it was mostly industrial. There was a shipyard and a sawmill and a shingle mill and the pulp mill all in the waterfront. Most of the industries [that] were on the waterfront are gone now.

AMPE: What were the names of the other companies on the waterfront?

BROWN: One of them was Morris...

MRS. BROWN: ...Morrison.

BROWN: Morrison Box and Lumber Mill. They made wooden boxes and they were right next to the pulp mill. And I can't remember the names some of the other companies, really. On the south side in Fairhaven there was Pacific American Fisheries which is... they had the largest salmon carrier in the world.

AMPE: What was your first day at the pulp and timber mill like?

BROWN: I went to work there first day as a painter's helper and we worked up on a scaffold and [were] painting the building warehouse about forty feet high on a fourteen inch plank held up there by a couple of old blocks and no safety pants or anything. [They] didn't think about safety back in those days. I was scared to death but I sat on a plank most of the day [and] after I got I use to it I could stand up and work like the rest of them. I was just a kid.

AMPE: How long did you work there?

BROWN: Forty-five years.

AMPE: How did the com... [if] you were to walk inside the company how did it look?

BROWN: About that time it was just down... right, it was back from the waterfront quite a ways – the old mill was – and it was all wooden buildings and in front of it between the waterfront and the mill was all filled in land that had been filled out of the bay. Then, in 1950 – not 1950 – in 1937 they built the new mill with a big brick building and it's farther down, closer to the waterfront.

AMPE: Why did you choose to work there?

BROWN: What?

AMPE: Why did you choose to work there?

BROWN: Why did I...

AMPE: ...choose to work at the Pulp and Timber Mill?

BROWN: Why, I became retirement age, and I retired in '79. I was sixty three years old.

AMPE: Can you tell me some of your responsibilities for each job you had at the pulp and timber mill.

BROWN: At first I was a helper and [when] I started I was a laborer; I was a helper in almost every department. First helper job I had was painter's helper. Then I moved into the machine shop and I was machine shop helper – learned to run machine tools and the lathe and drill presses. Then I... worked in the electrical department as a helper for a while... and became a welder's helper, and the welder quit and I became the number one welder in the mill. I worked at that the rest of my... It was in about 1936 and I worked as a welder for the rest of my time with them, and in the maintenance department.

AMPE: What did the community think of the company when you first started working there?

BROWN: It was considered a really good part of Bellingham. It was probably one of the largest employees in Bellingham at the time. Shortly after I went to work there they took over the paper mill, too, and it became, oh, about eight hundred employees, shortly after it built the new mill and grew larger.

AMPE: Can you describe a typical day at the plant?

BROWN: Well, we worked hard in maintenance... which I worked all the time, most all the time, as a helper until I became a journeyman. And we... didn't worry [about] coffee times and things like that back in those days. Everybody just worked all day long and their bosses expected them to. And shortly... after the war, when people started coming back to the mill and new people come into maintenance, then people started taking coffee periods and things like [that]. And that's become an easier place to work actually. It was always a good place to work. They had good bosses and supervisors. And after we got the union we had good... we started getting better conditions and good pay. The union got started in 1934 shortly after I went to work there. ... I joined the union in '36 and that's when the union started really being a big influence.

AMPE: Why did the union come there at first?

BROWN: Well, at that period of time, unions were becoming... start[ing] to organize most of the industries on the Pacific Coast and employees joined because they knew they would get better working conditions, shorter hours, better pay. Unions were really strong in our industry for years.

AMPE: What did the different people working at the plant think of each other?

BROWN: It was like one big happy family for year and years. There was a lot of family [who] worked there: uncles, fathers, sons. That was about the same place... that was about the time unions were getting going. Employees were really loyal to the company. The company was really good, treated their employees really well.

AMPE: What did your other family members do in Bellingham?

BROWN: Oh, one of my brothers was a... [interruption – unrelated material cut out]. One of my brothers was an auto mechanic. He started out in Bellingham and he soon went to Seattle and worked for a big auto dealer down there. [He] became a service manager and then went into his own business as an automotive mechanist. My other brothers, one of them worked in an auto parts place and then he moved back east to become a plumber. And one [of] my brothers, [the] educated one in the family, went to college – University of Washington – and became a mechanical engineer. [He] came back home and went to work to Georgia Pacific as an engineer and then moved to Ketchikan and was an engineer at the Ketchikan Mill which was originally built by our company.

AMPE: What was the greatest change you've seen in the plant since you started working there?

BROWN: Well, it grew larger, and expanded into different types of businesses. Originally it was just what was called an unbleached pulp mill. But in the early [days], just before the war, it built an alcohol plant and then a bleach plant. Then [it] went into better types of pulp and paper [and] then they took over the paper mill and... developed a lot of byproducts. It became as much a chemical plant as it was a pulp mill.

AMPE: How did your job change over the years?

BROWN: Oh, new types of welding came in so I learned. I started out as [an] octave settling welder – torch welder – and we got a carp welding machine that ironed lead. Then welding took over most all of piping... in my department, and when we got new types of welding started by [Eli ?] and so forth. I learned all these different types at the mill and became number one welder and [did] all the special welding work for the different departments and maintenance. That's the way my department changed, and the mill grew larger... and after they built the bleach plant they expanded the mill. The mill was all modernized and every few years they would get some kind of new equipment. So it became one of the... healthiest and best pulp mills probably in the country for many years.

AMPE: What caused all those changes?

BROWN: Oh, just economic times and changes in processes.

AMPE: Did those changes change the way you thought about your work?

BROWN: I always liked my job and I was always [looking for] a challenge. Maintenance work is that way and it was good work. I was never a production person and so I don't know how the people in production felt. Although we were working for a company and even after Georgia Pacific took over it, it was a good company. But back in about '64 we had a big upheaval and we changed unions [and] had a short strike. [The] new union has done a great job – AWPPW. And I became the real active in the union for several years until I retired. It wasn't the same place as original. The original mill was like a big happy family, but after we got bigger, especially after Georgia Pacific took over, we had to depend on our union to keep things going – like to the benefit of employees – more so then we did in the early days.

AMPE: What was the strike over in '64?

BROWN: The companies... had our own organization called the Manufacturers' Association and we generally dealt as units to companies, as all together in a union, different union locals on the coast all together, and we went and had what we called uniform bargaining. We reached an impassable and companies decided that [they] didn't want to raise wages anymore and they wanted to cut benefits, and [they] didn't want to put anymore money into pension benefits and so we really reached an impassable spot. That was in 19... summer of 1978, in July, we went on strike and had a seven month strike [that] ended in February '79. It was shortly before I quit.

AMPE: How did the way that the community thought about the company change?

BROWN: I think the majority was behind the workers. Out of all the... Georgia Pacific was one of the better companies in the Manufacturers' Association. Some of the other companies were really hard and tough but Georgia Pacific pretty well was pretty loyal to its employees and I would say it was one better ones to work for on the post.

AMPE: What new products were added over the years?

BROWN: Oh, originally we just manufactured unbleached pulp and then they converted to bleach pulp and they manufactured really high grade pulp that was used in photography paper and book paper and then they went into pipe products called lignisite products. They manufactured well drilling mud additives and flop which they sprayed Christmas trees. ... They built an alcohol plant and made alcohol... out of the waste wood chips. Out of the pulp waste wood liquor that was left over after the pulp was made. And the byproduct division became the biggest money maker and they took over the paper mill, and part of the pulp mill went into over to the paper mill and became toilet tissue and paper towels and things like that.

AMPE: How did these new products affect your job?

BROWN: They really didn't affect my job. Actually it was... the paper division and pulp division are treated like two different companies, or almost, and they had very... my maintenance job was just all in the pulp mill so I never got over to the paper mill.

AMPE: What were the most significant events you remember at the plant?

BROWN: One of the most significant was the year that the alcohol plant blew up. [laughing] I got a comp... material here if you want to look at it.

AMPE: Please.

BROWN: [Pointing to pictures within a newspaper article] I was a welder on the roof there when it set off the explosion that... Here is an article about the union, the big strike, and that's about the strike too. There is a picture of the maintenance crew I worked on a first off. There is the machine shop I worked out of, the machine shop, and I had my own little welding shop in connection with the machine shop.

AMPE: Do you still know any of these guys?

BROWN: Huh?

AMPE: Do you still know any of these guys?

BROWN: I know several of them. I know all of them but they're not all alive, and some of them moved away. Practically all of them are retired, well, they're all retired by now. I'm right in there. I knew all of the maintenance people. I knew most of the people in the mill because I was all over the mill with welding jobs. That's the one nice thing about it is that everybody knew

everybody. That's a newsletter that the company put out, and I think that one is about my dad when he retired as master mechanic.

AMPE: [Pointing to photograph] This is your dad then?

BROWN: My dad's up above there, yeah.

AMPE: How long did he work there?

BROWN: He worked there from about 1929 to '61.

AMPE: So, this is the strike of the '70s?

BROWN: Yeah, in '78. And there's an article about the strike and I was interviewed about by that... paper quoted quite a bit in there.

AMPE: [Pointing to article] And this is the same strike in the '70s?

BROWN: Yeah, it's the only big strike we had. We had what we call thirty years of what they call peaceful relations at the company until the big strike came.

AMPE: [Pointing to article] Can you explain this one. You said there was an explosion?

BROWN: Yeah, in the alcohol plant – one of the stills – I was welding on some piping on the roof. It was connected with one of the stills and something had gone wrong and the still was full of alcohol vapor instead of water like it was supposed to be and so, when I struck an arch on some pipe up above, why the still exploded and blew the top of the still up through the roof of the plant building. Some of it landed out in the lot on top of the parked cars, and other buildings. And I was right on the roof with a helper and we were just lucky that no body was hurt. All the windows were broken out [of] the building and there [were] three stills in the building [and] one of them was completely demolished and had to be rebuilt.

AMPE: So you were up on the roof when that actually happened?

BROWN: Yeah.

AMPE: What did that look like from up there?

BROWN: Well, there was a lot of piping on the roof and the piping was all bent up and in all directions and broken up, and some of this metal... landed back on the roof right along side of us – you can see a pile of it there, stainless steel, a piece of stainless steel. And there was an inside of a still that had blown out. And by the time – I was dazed a little – by the time I came to and looked out over the edge [of the] roof, every fire truck and every ambulance in town was down below expecting a lot of people to be hurt, for a big [explosion] like it was. ... There [were] two or three pipers working inside of the building but they fell out without being hurt. [The] helper and I weren't hurt, we were just scalded a little from some hot water that came out of the pipes

that had broke up. [Laughing] It was a miracle that nobody was hurt. You expect when an alcohol plant blows up everything is going to go, you know.

AMPE: So, who's mistake was it that...?

BROWN: It was one of the... [the] supervisors give out, before we can weld on anything like that we had to have a permit from the supervisors. [The] supervisor, thinking everything was stabilized and locked in like it was supposed to be, gave out the permits. So, evidently it was the supervisor's fault. He was the one who got it in the neck for a while. And overall, although we worked, before those days, by that time, it was safe. There was a lot safety precaution and you didn't work on things without locking the valves and all that and knowing it was in a safe condition. But before for many years we worked without safety precautions and we were all pretty lucky nobody was... In all my time there I only remember one person being killed on the job and two or three being injured really bad. Most of us got by without any injuries.

AMPE: Did your job change at all after that happened?

BROWN: No, I was still number one welder.

AMPE: Did they add any safety precautions at all or...?

BROWN: Yeah, they kept adding them. That was about the time OSHA and WSHA came in, and just before that, and so they were pretty careful all the time after that. Matter of fact, it was hard to work because there was so many safety precautions – all the safety equipment you had to wear and... We used to go down in tanks without breathing apparatus and after that, when we went down into chemical tanks, we took breathing apparatuses with us. It was really an unhealthy place to work in many ways because of gas from the processed sulfite acid gas and chlorine gas. When you did maintenance, when you worked on the equipment, well you would breathe a lot of that and it's a miracle that I ever lived as long as I did after working the pulp mill for forty-five years. I'm still alive but, barely. [Laughing]

AMPE: Were there any historical events that you remember while working there that affected the plant in any way?

BROWN: Well, war. When World War II came a lot of our employees went into the service and women started coming to the mill which was really unusual. And I was... some of us were considered essential employees in essential industry and were never called up to the service. I was never called.

AMPE: Because of your job?

BROWN: Because of my job. Paper was considered a pretty important product for the war effort. That's probably one of the biggest things that affected the mill, and as it grew – and when Georgia Pacific took over which I think was in 1963 or some back there about that time – why, the mill administrative and supervisor force you could say quadrupled when Georgia Pacific took over. I had one or two bosses before, I had about five or six when Georgia Pacific took over. And

it was harder to work and harder to do things because we had so darn many supervisors [that] nobody would take any authority. You would be working on a job and you'd have to have some advice or something. You'd go to your supervisor and he'd pass it on to somebody else. If you could find them they [were] usually in meetings. Before that, when my dad was maintenance supervisor and he [had] one assistant, we always knew where we were at. We always knew what we were doing. He knew the mill but the new supervisors, there were just too many of them. That's the way big companies operate. How they make money is beyond me, but they do. When it was small and lean, why, it was really was efficient.

AMPE: How did environmental legislation affect your job?

BROWN: Environmental? Well, it affected a job quite a lot because of the... Once in a while some of the gas down in the mill gets loose and you'd breathe gas, maybe you get burned eyes, maybe you get a sore throat and things like that. But then over the years the mill improved and they took care of a lot of those environmental issues a lot better then they did originally. That was a bad feature of the mill when it originated, almost no control over things like that.

AMPE: What was the best thing about working in Bellingham [and] in this plant in particular?

BROWN: Oh, Bellingham was small enough... it wasn't a crowded place. And Bellingham is a real nice area anyway, on account of all the countryside around Mount Baker, and lakes – pretty hard to find a better place to work then in Bellingham. And working... after the union took over the mill, well we had good pay and good working conditions. You couldn't ask for a better place to work. I didn't, I thought. Anyway, that's why I stayed there all those years.

AMPE: Did you ever have to compromise your beliefs for the company?

BROWN: Oh, once in a while. Sometimes you did things you didn't want to do in order to keep your job, you know. Most of the way you done it and conditions you worked under. As you got... [the] longer you worked there the more you became independent. ... I was one of the spoiled employees because I was number one welder and [did] a lot of work that nobody else did that I sort had my own way and was almost my own boss for the last twenty years.

AMPE: How did people respond when you told them you worked at Georgia Pacific?

BROWN: A lot of people wouldn't believe that you ever worked in a place so long for one thing. And it was considered one of the better places in Bellingham to work. Most people respected people who worked there.

AMPE: What was the most memorable thing about working at the plant?

BROWN: Oh, I would probably [say] that explosion, for one thing. [Laughing] Before I retired I'd become what they called a journeyman, plus a little better pay because of my position, and I enjoyed being really active in the union.

AMPE: Did you have a position in the union?

BROWN: What?

AMPE: Did you have a position in the union?

BROWN: Pardon?

AMPE: Did you have a position in the union?

BROWN: Oh, I was a delegate and a trustee for several years.

AMPE: What were your responsibilities?

BROWN: As a delegate you go to conferences for the other unions and when then when wage time came around negotiators came around to be on the negotiating committee. And trustee was kind of to look after the finances and operation of the union.

AMPE: How do you think future generations should remember the work you did?

BROWN: Oh [laughing], most everybody that worked in the middle of the time I did knew me – I was kind of considered a legend by the time I left the mill – and I still run into them and they all know me. Everybody that I ever worked with knows me.

AMPE: How do you think future generations should remember the company?

BROWN: It was a nice, a good place to work and good pay, and Bellingham was a good place to live so... For a working person working at a wage job that [didn't have a] college education, it was... you couldn't ask for anything better.

AMPE: How do you think people should remember the waterfront itself?

BROWN: I think we should remember... keep part of the waterfront for industrial, small industries, or any kind of industries we get. That's something we really lack in this area is good paying industries – too many service jobs. And we shouldn't just make it all into a park on the waterfront. We should keep part of it industrial like that and we should probably make the rest of it into residential area and trails.

AMPE: What do you think will happen to the waterfront in Bellingham in the near future?

BROWN: I think it will be developed like they plan with probably too much park, probably too many high buildings. Bellingham [doesn't] need any high buildings, four or five stories is enough. You just ruin the character and the looks of the town if we start building high rises all over the place.

AMPE: What has been your greatest [...?] this far in life?

BROWN: Treat other people the way you like to be treated. Be friendly. I guess that's it.
[Laughing]

AMPE: Is there anything that I didn't ask you about your life or the plant or Bellingham that you want to add?

BROWN: It was always a good place to work and the supervisors... they had a lot of good people working – there supervisors as well as working force – and so never... [I] always was proud and happy to be a worker from there.

AMPE: Great thank you so much!

BROWN: You're welcome.