Interview: Irvin Figg (IF)
Interviewer: Sean Griffin (SG)
Date: May 27, 2025
Location: Burnaby, B.C.
Transcription: Jane Player

SG [00:00:05] Hi, Irv. Can you just give me the basics to start with, where you were born, what year, and so on?

IF [00:00:13] I was born in 1949 in Greensburg, Indiana, but—

SG [00:00:16] What was the actual date?

IF [00:00:18] Oh, November ... And shortly thereafter a year or so we moved across the line into Illinois. So, I grew up in a town of 250, small farm town 90 miles south of Chicago. My father was a railroader; my mother stayed at home with us. He was gone—he left Sunday after midterm meal and he usually got home Friday night sometime. He always worked on a traveling gang. He was a signal maintainer—well, signalman at first and finally got a maintainer's job down in Lafayette, Indiana, but that was still—had to live away from home. So, it was just the one income and four of us kids all born within seven and a half, eight years. I was second oldest. Typical small farm town. Kind of growing up probably the same as it is was back then in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, etcetera. At 10 years old, you start walking bean fields, cuttin' corn out with a machete. You know, at 12 or 13, if you're big enough and can push the clutches down, you can work the field and drive a tractor, and all of those sorts of things, right, take care of livestock. The only ones I didn't like were the chickens. The cattle and the pigs—I quite liked them.

SG [00:01:39] So, both your parents are U.S. born?

IF [00:01:42] Oh, yeah. My parents were both born in Southern Indiana, my mom down between the Wabash and the White River levee, back in the hills, no electricity, no nothing, right? We visited Grandma and Grandpa. You still had to go outside and turn the switch so the electric motor would pump the handle, and you had to cart water into the house every day. And my grandmother cooked on a wood stove in the kitchen, right. Started up with dried corn cobs and kindling. And the only heat, of course, was a pot belly stove in the living room. And it was—I always thought it was an adventure going down there, you know. My sisters didn't. [laughs] They had electricity by the time we got there. They never had running water in the house. They always had an outhouse.

SG [00:02:33] This is really a typical sort of—

IF [00:02:36] Typical for that area. For that area, yes. That's Southern Indiana hillbillies, you know. That's it. My grandfather picked out a dog every morning at about, well, as soon as the sun came up. He already had his breakfast. He'd grab a gun, pick up a dog, and go for a walk. And if he shot something good, that would be dinner.

SG [00:02:57] Yeah, I see.

IF [00:02:58] Did that every day of his life except when he was briefly sick with a stroke, and then he got rehab, got better and lived another three years. But that's where they found him because the dog came home one morning without him, you know. But that's the

life he loved. He never owned a thing in his life, except dogs and a good shotgun, a .22 and a decent rifle for deer.

SG [00:03:22] So, your dad worked on the railway, I presume this was a running trades union job?

IF [00:03:28] Oh yeah, it was Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen. Okay? My brother finished six years ago, forty-two years at the Brotherhood Maintenance of Wayworkers [Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes [sic]]. I worked the railroad three summers while I was in college in Brotherhood Railway Signalman. And I think I told you in the [pre-] interview the thing I liked about that union—I was only 16, no 18 then—was that the union had demanded and received a clause that they had to have a ten-minute safety meeting every morning, right? And there was a safety rule of the day, and they had a big book. But you'd all sit around and discuss that, you know. And, geez, I saw examples where it really worked, you know, when you're out there in the middle of nowhere and the freight comes rumbling by, and there is a whole bunch of lumber on it and the bands are broken, and they hang out another, you know, 8, 10 feet, which is where we do all our work. If you're not paying attention, it'll grab you, you know. And they taught us stuff like that. I was impressed. And every summer, when I went back for my job, I had a raise.

SG [00:04:42] So, would you say that you grew up in a union household?

IF [00:04:44] Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah. Oh, absolutely. And at 16, the first year I could actually get a real job, you know, outside of farming. Got a job at TRW, Thompson-Ramon-Woolridge. They're big in the space program now. Back then, it was radios. And we were making—basically we had a big press room, and then we had big conveyor lines out there, all women. We made tuners, condensers. We had probably in the neighborhood of 30 punch presses in the press room. We ran it through acid baths, all the rest of that stuff. But myself and one other young man got hired on for the summer (both of us 16) to help the maintenance guys because when the weather got nice, they'd schedule other stuff, right? So, we ended up working in the maintenance department which automatically gave us 25 cents more an hour because we were guys. And, I think it was IAM [International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers]. I'm not sure. I know I signed my card. Yeah, paid my dues. And my friend Becky, of course, she got stuck out on the line. So, I made two bits an hour more than she did. Two bits an hour more than the women who had been there for 20 years. You know, and this is before—there's no robots or any of that kind of stuff. Not a lot of power out there. You know, the lines would have Yankee screwdrivers on springs, right? So, it comes to me; it's my job to put these two screws in, [makes up and down movement with arm] boom, boom. Power in the belt, grab the next one, boom boom. That's the way it went.

SG [00:06:23] Was this in your hometown of Urquhart?

IF [00:06:26] This was in our big town. Urquhart County is the second largest county in the state of Illinois with the least amount of people in a county. Now, this is all farms. The largest town back then was a little over 5,000, 5,500 maybe, where the courthouse, the hospital, and that factory, which basically was a driver of that town. And after they closed down, of course, now it's about 4,000. And Walmart came to town. And the downtown now is pretty much deserted except for a couple of restaurants, and there's still a Western Auto there and a few other things but not much. The Walmart kind of kicked it. There's a Rural King farm supply out beside the Walmart.

SG [00:07:08] So, this is just another story of America's Rust Belt, hey?

IF [00:07:12] You got her. Yep. Rural Rust Belt, because back in the day, you know, when I was there, there wasn't any big corporate farms. You know, a family, say, of four kids, if you ran a little bit of livestock and had 250 acres maybe, maybe 300 at the most, in corn and soybeans, you could make a living. You could raise your family. You could send your kids to college. You know all those things. Family of four kids. But it's not that way at all now. So, consequently, you know, this is what emptied out the rural areas too, right? The only people that stay in those—I mean in my home town, there's only 134 people now. And they got three houses that got some kids in them, but they're renters because owners don't want to fix these homes. The home I grew up in was built in—I think it was 1872 or '74, I'm not sure which—and many of the houses in town were the same. Ours was the last one before the village line but it's surrounded by pasture, pasture, field, field right? It's not like you had a neighbor except way down the road, eh? But it was rather idyllic when you're a kid. You got the river down there, you build a boat, you do some fishing, you learn how to skate in the winter. We never played hockey because you couldn't buy hockey equipment there. You had to go almost to the city to get a pair of hockey skates and a stick. But we made our sticks, and we used beer cans and crushed them up. Nobody got too badly hurt. [laughs]

IF [00:08:47] The river didn't always freeze. I mean, if it was high water—you know, we had a lot of water during the year—it would run fast enough that it was difficult for it to freeze unless we were really bitter cold. And yeah, we got 20, 30 below Fahrenheit when I was a kid.

SG [00:09:03] You were off to college at—

IF [00:09:05] Seventeen, yeah. My last year in high school, well—as you know, I'm a bit of a procrastinator—so, anyways, I'd convinced myself that I couldn't afford a college degree, which was probably true, and my parents couldn't contribute. So, I applied to West Point and the Air Force Academy. I said, 'I can go to the Air Force and learn how to fly a plane, you know.' But I was a little late, so my congressman telegraphed me and then phoned me and said that, 'Well, Irvin, you're going to have to wait till next year. You're my alternate, my first alternate. So if you go to any college and take pre-engineering for a year, get decent grades, I'll appoint you next year.' And I said, 'Fine.' And by then, I got into Eastern Illinois University, which is where I graduated. We had six in my class who got good enough SAT scores. I mean, God bless, Lyndon B. Johnson. He did get these bills passed on the Pell Grants, etcetera, that you read about nowadays. So, I was the only one that got any money because the rest of them were the children of farmers, right? And so, their incomes and assets prohibited it, right? But one income for the six of us qualified me for $1,500 cash the first year, 1967. That was a lot of money, you know? And my dad's American Legion branch gave me four years of tuition and fee scholarship, right, so I never had to pay tuition and fees. My dad was a decorated, wounded veteran of the Pacific, WW2, right? So, that was good, and the first year I didn't even have to work at university. I made it. I had to phone my mom and borrow $100 to get home in May, end of May. But it's okay, because I already had the job at the railroad. The day after I get home, I'm on a tractor, you know, making money, so it was pretty good. She never would let me pay her back, God rest her, but that's okay. And the year after, I just realized that, you know, because of course, they get you started, the Pell. So, the second year, they only gave me $1,000, right? Third and fourth year, they gave me no money, but they arranged the loans. When I graduated, I owed the U.S., $1700, I think it was. That's nothing, you know, to get a BS, it's amazing.

SG [00:11:37] What was your degree that you got?

IF [00:11:39] I got a Bachelor of Science in Business Management with a major in finance. That's why I'm so wealthy. [laughs]

IF [00:11:48] Reality is when I graduated high school, I had two choices: go to college, go to Vietnam. So, I took the scholarship and the money and went to college. The rest of the young men in my age that didn't go to college ended up in the military, one way or the other, somewhere, you know. My best friend went—lived in San Antonio for years after he got out of the army. He got drafted, and they trained him as a medic, and he went to Fort Lewis, Washington out here, which is where everybody was leaving on their troops. They did still send troop ships in planes back then. But they didn't ship them to Vietnam yet because they had too many troops to inoculate. He had a full-time day job for four months, you know, inoculating troops and then he found out that yeah, he was next on the list, you know, which average casualty-free period for medics was about three weeks, I think then. Not very good. And—

SG [00:12:51] Does that mean that they themselves were casualties?

IF [00:12:52] Oh yeah. Absolutely. So, he knew this guy, and he got himself caught with a couple bags of pot. They arrested him, threw him in the brig. [laughs] He lost two pay grades, right? One stripe and a month's pay. And since he didn't have all that much time left on his enlistment by then, they sent him back to San Antonio and got him in a training program as a nurse, which he never did, but you know—

SG [00:13:26] But he avoided the—

IF [00:13:27] Yeah, he didn't get killed or maimed. There were too many people we knew that did, you know, back in those days in small counties because your draft boards have a small pool to pick from, and they all got quotas done by some idiot stick in Washington D.C. They don't know. Here's your quota, here's your population, here's your quota, right? It was pretty—it didn't make any sense for a lot of people they took, you know? And it didn't make any sense for a lotta people that got to join the National Guard either, you know.

SG [00:13:56] Yeah, I mean this is the time too a lot of people like you were bootin' it across the border to Canada to avoid the draft.

IF [00:14:03] That's right.

SG [00:14:04] You crossed that border eventually, but kind of through a different path. What was that?

IF [00:14:08] Well, the path was I got married 1971 in March ... I can't believe I remember that. Oh, it's the same as my birthday in November. But my ex-wife was from Chicago Heights, and her best friend was Andrea Chow since they were kids, right? And so, Andrea and what was to be her husband both went to Ohio State. Julianna and I went to Eastern and, so we were chums the whole time back and forth between Columbus, Ohio and Charleston, Illinois. And we all sat down one night at the library when they were out visiting in Charleston, and because (I can't recall, but I think it was, I'm pretty sure) it was right after the Black Panthers were murdered in their beds in Chicago, which was a real

turning point for us, you know. Jimmy and I were both two white guys married to two women—well his wife was Chinese. My ex-wife is half Guamanian, her mom's from Guam, but she looks Asian rather than Caucasian. And it wasn't a good time for us in that area of the state of Illinois. Down state's extremely conservative; they frown on those kind of marriages. Oh my god, you couldn't rent an apartment after we got married except university housing, we finally got in. Anyways, so we were going to leave anyhow. The war sucked. What was going on with the racism was just unbelievable, you know, because, of course, there was no racism in their families, my wife or her friends. And my family, my father would not—oh, if any of us kids ever said any of those words, you got rocked. 'You will never use that word in my house.'

SG [00:16:01] So, he was intolerant of racism.

IF [00:16:04] Oh,God, yes. He told me that—well, one morning, my little brother and I, six years younger, were watching John Wayne on a Saturday morning. Saturday morning, you're supposed to keep TV down quiet. Okay. So, Pop came out to go to the bathroom, and he says, 'Oh, what are you guys watching?' And my little brother, not knowing any better, said, 'We're watching John Wayne, Dad. He's killing all the Japs.' My dad came over, slapped him once, not hard. Said, 'I don't ever want to hear that word in the house again.' And my father had two purple hearts and a bronze star and all of that in the Pacific. So, that's just the way he was. Both my parents. My mother loved Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his wife like nobody's business. She really did. But that was a bit unusual, to be honest, in that area because we had two Anglo towns that went to school together and two French towns that went to school together, and for grade 9, 10, 11, and 12 we all went to high school together. All four towns, right? And white as the driven snow. Right? There was nothing else there. You know, it's simple. People didn't understand it. We had one black family move in my town when I was 12, but I was a paper boy, right, so I knew him right away. And so did Schleepers down the road there and Cheesy and Eva, the guy that—half owner of the bank. Anyways, they couldn't stand it. They left after a year and a half.

SG [00:17:45] What was it like coming across the border at that point?

IF [00:17:46] At that point, coming across the border, well, it was easy. Yeah, it was easy. Jim and Andrea came up in July of that year. They graduated in June from Ohio State, and they came up in July and my ex-wife flunked her French. You have to have foreign language to graduate in the state of Illinois, right? Which was odd because she was fluent in Spanish. Her father was a Spanish professor at University of Chicago, or Roosevelt University in Chicago. And she grew up every summer in Mexico where he taught English. Anyways, we had to stay later, and I got a job with a friend, who was a lead guitar and singer in a rock and roll band [laughs] in town, you know, like four—

SG [00:18:37] What was the job?

IF [00:18:38] No, no, that's what he did. He graduated, too, you know. He ended up having a lifetime career in management for JCPenney. Just died two years ago. Anyways, where was I? They had already come up. I got this job. We were renovating a house built right after the Civil War. Huge house owned by a guy from Taiwan, and his son was in the Master's MBA program, so that was his project. So, the three of us, we spent about four months, five months, knocking down or putting up extra walls, knocking down walls, getting all the old insulation out, re-insulating the place, all that stuff, right, make smaller

rooms. Which helped out when I got to Canada. And then, I think it was the first, last week of January, maybe, nah—somewhere around there.

SG [00:19:42] So, where did you land across the border? Where was it that you—

IF [00:19:45] Osoyoos.

SG [00:19:45] In Osoyoos?

IF [00:19:49] Oh, yeah. We went down to San Antonio to see my buddy I told you about, right? And then we had to go across and up to San Jose, California, where my ex-wife's mother's family all were, because Guamanians typically (her family anyways), they'd work for the government in Guam and get their 20-25 in, then they moved to the mainland. And like Uncle Ben, he worked for the Navy for 25 years. He came to San Jose and he got a job immediately in maintenance at—what's the name now—I can't recall it, it's in California, not far from San Fran, but it's a good way to make a good living. They all had nice homes, and San Jose was full of people from Asia, Pacific Islands a lot. It was kind of a strange town, but that was okay. So anyways, we're heading for Penticton, no GPS, you got to go by the map, right? I love maps.

SG [00:20:47] So, you just randomly chose Penticton just to—

IF [00:20:51] No! I skipped that part of my story. Like I said, we went to the library, the four of us, got out the Encyclopedia Britannica, started looking up stuff. And Jimmy, right away, goes, 'Okay, here's where we're going.' 'What? How do you know where you're going?' He says, 'Look at that photo.' And there's two people picking apples in the Okanagan. We thought it was [pronounces] o-CAN-i-gan, but we figured it wasn't once we got there. But he made the decision. And I said, 'Well, that's fine with me.' And those three, none of them I've never seen a real mountain, you know. They'd never been out West. I had been out West. I was a Boy Scout. I loved that stuff. I did a 10-day hike in the Rocky Mountains when I was like 14. It was great. I did a 20-mile canoe journey when I 13 in Northern Wisconsin, right?

SG [00:21:39] So, where did you actually start working in B.C.?

IF [00:21:42] In B.C., Jimmy told me that if I wanted to get my landed immigrant card, what I needed to do was get a job, right? If I had a job, he said they'll just rubber stamp you. So, you know, I wasn't looking for a career job or anything, I just wanted to get my landed right away. So, I knew—he knew, this guy, an old guy—well I say old, but I bet he was my age, maybe even not. But he couldn't drive his tractor anymore, on the orchard, right. And so, he needed somebody to drive his tractor for him and to run the forklift for the totes, all that sort of stuff, do the pruning, pick up the brush, all that. So, I did that for him for about two months. And then there was an ad in the paper for production workers at a new factory that was opening up in Penticton, which was—there was a factory there already that built the modular homes. You could get a half a house, half a house, or each on a trailer. You put your foundation down; guy drives them out. Crane picks them up, sets them on the foundation, assuming everybody measured right and poured right. And they opened up a packaged one, which is where you build all the walls in sections. You got to sheet them with plywood. You make the trusses, and you can put a whole house on a 40-foot trailer, a house of 2,000 or less square feet. You know, gyprock, roof shingles, etcetera. The whole works. So, I went down there and once again, that Vietnam War got me the job. I was interviewed by this guy, and he asked me what I knew about this. Well, I helped my dad

with all the projects around home. Plus, I had those four months renovating an old home, right? And he found out I was American. And so, well, his daughter had just married a draft dodger from Seattle. And his religious beliefs, for one, he was a Jehovah Witness, didn't allow him to believe in war or anything like that and just assumed I was a draft dodger. And he knew I graduated university, but I was an American that got out of there on my own. I don't think he assumed I was a draft dodger; he just thought that I was guy that didn't want to put up with those folks any longer, which is, he nailed it down at the time. So, he gave me the job. I was like the third person hired. And within a year I was the foreman. So, it was cool. Two and a half years there, we ended up, when I left there was, oh geez, 30 employees.

SG [00:24:16] And so you got—it's a far cry from what it is today. You got your landed immigrant status basically within the first couple of months.

IF [00:24:23] Oh yeah. Yeah, all we had to do was—we drove—I had that job with the farm guy at the time. You just drive down to Oroville, Washington, right across the border, make a U-turn, come back up to Customs and they'd say, 'What's the purpose of your visit to Canada?' And we'd say, 'We want to see immigration.' Boom. 'Well then, go right over there. See that place? 'Yep.' You go over there. You get an initial interview, and then they send you away for physicals, right? You gotta have physical exams. Two weeks later, they give us a call. You go back down there. Sit for the main interview with the guy. And he says, 'Come on, I know you're not gonna spend your life on the farm. You got a Bachelor of Science in Business Management.' I said, 'You know, you also saw I worked on the railroad three summers and I grew up farming. I liked the outdoors.' [laughs]

IF [00:25:15] He laughs. [laughs] And so he said, 'But that's fine, you know, your qualifications are good for us.' And he looks at my ex-wife and he goes, 'It's a good thing you're married to him. We have no call whatsoever in Canada for a Bachelor of Arts in Art History.' Anyways, and our friends Jim and Andrea, he told Jim the same thing, 'Good thing you married her. We got no call for Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. We got lots of them.' But his wife had a bachelor's degree teaching deaf and blind, right? Which—that was automatic, you know. She ended up getting her PhD in Victoria and had a good career there the whole time. And he ended up being—getting hired three years after we came to Canada, he got hired by Veterans Administration. He had a full career there. They hired him in Penticton, and he worked a year in Penticton, and they shipped his butt to Whitehorse, he and his wife, and so he did a few years at Whitehorse. They both loved it, they're very outdoorsy. He's an ice climber, all those things. And then he got to Victoria, and they've been there ever since, right? He retired from there, nice career.

SG [00:26:26] We were in a different world at that time.

IF [00:26:28] Oh, I tell you, for the four of us, Canada certainly worked out, I'm telling you. And, oh, it was like a breath of fresh air. I couldn't believe it. People in Penticton treated us normal. Nobody treated us as normal back home, you know?

SG [00:26:43] And then apparently you got a call from what used to be called Manpower to say there was a—

IF [00:26:49] That's when I came to Richmond. Yeah, we spent five years there. Bought a house. Then my ex-wife decided she wanted to come back to college because she was working in a sheltered workshop for mentally handicapped young adults and older, you know. I loved it. You know, we would go to the dances and all that stuff, and chaperoned

Expo 74 down in Spokane. It was a gas. I really enjoyed it, and she liked it. So, we came back, came out here so she could go to school. And I rented an apartment in Richmond, in a fourplex, and I let her get a job first, right, because I knew I wouldn't have any trouble. Just put the tools in the back of the truck, because that's what I did in Penticton when I quit at the plant and had to pick up some jobs. And then a buddy and I had a small company that we ran for 18 months before he switched and went to Fort McMurray to make his fortune, and I wasn't going, no way. [laughs].

IF [00:27:49] Yeah, she got a job as a teller, Bank of Montreal, because she'd worked for the Bank of Montreal in Penticton when we first got there. I went down to Manpower, walked in, had the interview with the guy. He says, 'Okay, I can start you to work on Monday, no problem.' He says, 'You're not going to like the job.' I said, 'Why? He goes, 'Well, this guy's got to call for five or six employees every single week. He just keeps losing workers, you know.' So, I said, 'Okay. I'll give it a whirl.' So, I went out there, and it was in Richmond, right on 5 Road, building the whole complex of [unclear] houses, which was CMHC supported. Which allowed the code to go a little bit different. Not a lot, but—and he had a huge number of houses to build. I got on a crew with two other guys doing the foundations because those homes, you put the forms in, and then the plumbers, electricians would all come in and put their stuff in the sand, right, you know, and you cover it and all that kind of stuff. And then you pour the whole floor, the footings, everything at the same time, which, you know, is okay, but I never much liked concrete work. And after about—well, after three weeks, he came over to me one day and he said, 'You built houses, haven't you? I said, 'Yes.' 'Can you cut a set of stairs?' I said, 'Of course I can.' Because they all had similar stairs that went up around the corner and stuff. And he says, 'Good, because I got nobody to do that. They screwed up two in a row. I want you to go over there and fix them now.' So, I went over and fixed them and he says, 'All right, you can work by yourself from now on. I want you to follow the guys.' Because they made the houses so fast. And each house I went to, I put the stairs in, and then I had to go around and do the check for the fire stop, all the backing, make sure all that stuff was in, which it never was. But when you build packaged homes, you're doing it in your mind anyhow. You're looking at a plan. You're not looking at how do they stand up or anything.

IF [00:29:49] Anyways, the guy from Manpower phoned me about six weeks later and said, 'You know, I got a good job for you. Much better, you'll be happier.' I said, 'Yeah, what's that?' He said, 'BC Packers in Steveston'. I said, 'What's, that?' I was thinking meat packing, you know? Anyways, he says, 'It's a fish plant. You're gonna like it. They got a good contract. It's more money for ya. Good bunch of people I deal with down there.' You know, cause they used Manpower a lot back then, right. And so, I got the interview and basically all, what was his name? Phil Thomas wanted me to know was, 'Can you drive a forklift?' Going, yes, you know, it's not hard. And of course, he did ask, you know what kind of work I said, 'I've done everything, you know, from concrete work, building homes, renovation, commercial renovation. Did two of those with my partner.' All that sort of stuff. And he says, 'Well, okay,' and at the time, the contract said, five years on the tools makes you qualified. And they wanted me to be qualified, and I was, so—well, I've never worked in a fish plant. And I never worked over the Fraser River or water of any kind, that's true. But—

SG [00:31:03] That plant was also known throughout the world as the largest single fish processor in the British Empire.

IF [00:31:09] That's right. It was a lot.

SG [00:31:11] Was it running everything at that time?

IF [00:31:13] Full tilt boogie. I hired on, on 7th of August or was it July? I don't recall for sure. But yeah, full tilt boogie. Over a thousand people on day shift. Six, seven hundred on night shift. Twelve hours—well eleven, you know, cuz you gotta have some cleanup in between.

SG [00:31:34] I think they were doing a lot more than canning, too?

IF [00:31:36] Oh, they had everything. You know, they had—it was the largest fish processing plant on the west coast of North America at the time. And we, of course, canned fish, had 10 canning lines plus a mince line. And they had a—cans were labeled there. They had their own labeling warehouse. And that was in the old Imperial Cannery part, right? The part where they did the labels was built in—my God, it was before 1900. I can't remember the year. At any rate, that stuff was still there, I couldn't believe it. Anyhow, then you go through the cannery, and of course there's an acidulation and reduction plant to make fish meal, fish oil, all those things. Then you go across to where the new buildings were, which was the new fresh fish and the new cold storage. And they had a good seven, eight dressing lines in fresh fish. Cold storage, we'd run three to four packing lines right up till Christmas on shipping frozen product, right? And we also had prepared products. We made fish sticks, fish cakes, eventually got into salmon wellingtons, etcetera, all of that. But it didn't survive, you know, the plant did not survive. The job was a great job. I loved every bit of it, you know, every day—well, not every day. But there's always something different happening, right? And within a year, I got my own crew of four guys and myself. And every winter, we were the guys that went underneath on the bottom of the river and jacked up the old building, take out the bad wood, put in the good wood, that sort of thing, right, for a good two months. And you typically work from anywhere between 6 o'clock and 8 o' clock at night because you want to catch the lowest tide. And we'd be off usually at 4.30 in the morning. And It was a good two, three months gig. I never minded it. You get used to the smell within a few weeks after you start there, you know, or you don't work there.

SG [00:33:39] You're down there working at river bottom, basically?

IF [00:33:42] Up your knees in mud and junk. [laughs]

SG [00:33:47] Really, eh? And then get cold, because you're doing this before the season begins, so that we're talking about—

IF [00:33:52] Yeah, we're doing that while nothing's going on under the old buildings, right, because the old buildings are for typically unloading fish in that one corner, cannery here, there's no canning in the winter, you know. The latest we ever canned was December 6th. And January, February, March, herring—sometimes we get a bit last week in March, right? But when I look back, it's rare that I got to—no, the first week of February, the last week of February, I mean, because usually it's in March, right, when they finally let the gulf go. So, of course, you know, everybody, all the maintenance guys would be in for sure. And back then, in the winter time, most of the maintenance guys, they just kept on. They sat in their little rooms and played cards. Because the R&M budget was never approved until the second week of January. And you couldn't spend a dime. You couldn't order any parts. You couldn't do anything. How are you going to re and reline, say? No parts. And it was already that stupid book on zero inventory, right? They were believing that. But carpenters, man, we had to work. Yeah, absolutely, us and some of the machinists and welders, yeah.

And a few of the other trades, but not, and there was nothing that wasn't just doing a little bit of band-aid work for them.

SG [00:35:16] So, working as the trades, you're obviously working a lot more than the regular crews.

IF [00:35:21] Yeah, we're 12 months a year. They always gave us 12 months a year. The difference was, you know, on the floor back then, I'm telling you, those kids from grade 10, that were old enough at the end of the summer, they'd work that cannery, every shift available to them and all the overtime, they'd pay cash for a brand-new Mustang. And then they go, 'Why do I want to go back to school?' Because we had all those other departments. Prepared products ran almost year round. The labeling warehouse did run all year-round. The cold storage ran pretty much all year around because of drag fish, which we also unloaded and froze and processed at the time. And so, even if you're a kid, it didn't take long before you were getting some really good money and none of them minded taking the winter off and not going to school. [laughs]

SG [00:36:19] You also started around 1977, if I'm not mistaken.

IF [00:36:22] That's when I started, yeah.

SG [00:36:24] Which was right after the Law of the Sea Convention cut the Japanese off the sockeye fishery in the Aleutians, which meant a lot more fish coming our way. Did you, so this must've been kind of the heyday of fish processing, especially on the salmon runs?

IF [00:36:42] Yeah, it was the heyday on the salmon runs and even in the north, right? You know, I mean the Skeena was healthy back then. Problem was, you know, the Americans kept getting our sockeye and we weren't allowed to fish their chums. So, there you go. All's fair in love and war, right? Anyhow.

SG [00:37:05] So, when you're working with a lot of trades and different things happening, what's the health and safety situation like?

IF [00:37:11] Oh, okay. Health and safety, you know. It was pretty—I don't know, I personally didn't notice anything really out of sorts except for the fact that, you know, I knew were on scaffolding that was, you know, no handrails, no nothing, you know. When the tide's out and you've got a bunch of pads down there and a six-by-six post and a 50 ton jack on top of it to hold—which weigh 105 pounds each, I weighed 'em—[laughs] because I made the machine shop cut the handle off, and put two handles on so two guys could do it. Because I'm telling you, it was stretching for me to get one of those up there myself. And you know, your post is 14 feet long. So, you're on scaffold pretty far off that crap. But if you fall down there, there's concrete with rebar sticking out of it, broken crap from 100 years, right? So, that was, you know. But then, hell, I was used to that. I painted for two weeks in that plant in Wonsika when I was 16 on a piece of 2x12. Dome ceiling, right? No handrails, no anything. The other guy that was helping, he scooted down. He would only paint what he could paint from here sitting on the plank. Well, I stood up and I painted as much as I could reach it. And there was a section that was about eight feet to ten feet long in the middle that I couldn't reach. But the old journeyman painter he came up there, man, and he was carrying a state of Washington wooden apple box. And he put that sucker on the plank and stood on the apple box, painted all of it. And he was like, oh, he's only a couple years away from retirement, I remember. He'd been painting all his life. So, I always just thought, 'Well, hey, some people can do this and some people can't,' right? But

I never had any of my crew do anything that I wouldn't do at the fish plant, you know, because that didn't seem to be right when I knew in my head that it probably was a little hazardous, right?

SG [00:39:09] At that point, was there any active involvement in safety?

IF [00:39:12] Not for me, and not for the tradesmen that I know of. I told you, Helen O'Shaughnessy, she was pretty important in my union life because she's the one that called me one night and said, Irvin, you need to go to that safety meeting tomorrow. I said, 'What safety meeting?'

SG [00:39:29] O'Shaughnessy was the organizer for the UFAWU [United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union].

IF [00:39:32] That's right, for the UFAWU, and had been with them for quite some time, what I understand. But at any rate, so I said fine, and I went to the safety meeting the next day. And I got up there and I realized that, you know, I was the only person there out of the trades that wasn't a foreman, right? Although, let's see who was? Yeah. There was only one staff foreman, in other words, salaried foreman, and that was the electrician because they needed his ticket, right? The rest of them were called charge hands like we were. Now, they all got a little extra money. It was 25 cents an hour in the collective agreement but I know they got a buck or more depending, right. But nonetheless, I was the only one there that was actively involved in doing any trade work, you know, and fresh fish, cold storage, warehouse, etcetera, they were all charge hands at least, you know, which were in the bargaining unit, but also, I have a certain different kind of responsibility to the boss and a good responsibility to the crew too. And most of them were very good with the crews, you know, as far as being understanding and all of that stuff.

IF [00:40:43] So, anyhow, Margaret, the personnel manager who was sitting up front with the maintenance supervisor and the plant manager, blah, blah. All the managers. And she said, Irvin, what are you doing here? I said, 'Well, Helen phoned me last night and evidently I'm the new union rep for this committee.' 'Is that right?' she says. I said, 'Yeah.' 'Okay.' Well, we went on, and we saw the movie, right? You know, you got a 10-minute movie. I can think it was on forklift. I can't recall. But anyhow, you had a 10-minute film, any questions? And then they do a plant report, and they go to every single department. And every department said, 'We're OK.' Now, I'd spent a considerable amount of time walking the plant, because I could be any where I wanted to be, as long as I was carrying my tools, had tools on me, it didn't matter. And so, I had gone around and asked all the people I knew in different various departments, 'Well, Irvin, as a union rep, what do you have to report?' Pulled out piece of foolscap, you know, both sides. And I started, yeah, I started reading it off and, oh my God, that's when it hit the fan, you know? And I only got through about five or six items and the maintenance guy, he looks at me and he says, 'Irvin, just give me that list and we'll prioritize it.' And I said, 'Well, I'll give you the list if you photocopy it for me, I want it back, and now,' you know. So, he did and things changed. We actually got different people in the safety committee rather than just people that told other people what to do. So, it was impressive. And I thought, well, that Helen, she's a smart girl, you know.

SG [00:42:29] How long did you sit on this—

IF [00:42:31] I sat on it for about a year, because once I sat on it, because I knew so many people were, you know, being a carpenter, you can be anywhere. And I lived in Steveston,

played ball in Steveston, golfed in Steveston, all that, you know with these guys and women. So, I knew a lot of people and they—and once I told them how it had been going and everything and we started getting some results, you know, within the end of the week, we had a brand-new handrail down to the number one pump scowl, which was so hazardous none of us ever used it, you know. You could take one guy and rip the end of it off. And we had that redone in a week. And yeah, we even sat down and we prioritized the list together, you now, instead of him just going, well, looking for the one that's gonna be the most visible, right? Anyways, that was good. The only other problem in safety was, and I can't remember the name of the plant, I think it was. Well, it's the old rice mill plant, but it was Quality. Quality Fish I think. And that guy one day got his arm stuck in a screw.

SG [00:43:39] The ice auger.

IF [00:43:40] Yeah, I'm not sure it was an ice bit. It was a screw anyways, it wasn't covered. Anyhow, my daily partner, Gary, who I worked with every day for 16 years. We spent the whole weekend toughening up guard rails. Machine shop and the welders spent the whole weekend and more, putting new guards over the floor screws and all of that. Sometimes it's difficult, I mean, we even had to tack some of them down because clean up crews would come in in the middle of the night and unbolt them, take them off, because they wanted to clean it better. And then they'd leave the damn thing off in the morning and the day shift would come in, and, of course, in the ice room it turns into big rock candy mountain overnight, right? You know, that flake ice. So, for those guys to get it in the screw, the screw ran over and into the fresh fish, and they needed lots of ice, right, fresh fish needs ice. So, they'd get in there in the morning and guys would climb up there, you know, with a shovel and try to break up that. And the grates down there were like this, so [sighs] it's still a pain in the butt getting it down there. So, we're always fighting with them to leave that grate on. It's just ice. You don't even need to clean that sucker out, right? Eventually we did. We tacked them down. So, you know, you get about a quarter inch of a weld on it and you just hit it with the torch it comes off, so. But after that, I think it improved drastically.

SG [00:45:13] So, definitely the union's involvement was pretty critical.

IF [00:45:15] I say it was. Absolutely.

SG [00:45:18] Yeah, you'd also mentioned to me that there was a very respected shop steward, Romeo DuBois, I think his name was.

IF [00:45:24] Yeah, Romeo.

SG [00:45:25] And that you followed him?

IF [00:45:27] Yeah, I was—

SG [00:45:28] as the chief shop steward?

IF [00:45:29] Yeah, I became the chief shop steward. The end of '88, I was in my good friend Doc's chair in the first aid office, Tim Oven, my wife's cousin, and I was crabbing at him about how I thought '88, because I was the only guy that everybody else worked. And the trades had to do the picketing, because workers catch fair-caught fish. They work all weekend, make a ton of money. And I only had like 30 people that I could take out for Imperial Plant, Gulf of Georgia, Paramount. It was difficult picketing all those places 24

hours a day with a small crew like that, you know. I mean, the first day or two is great, you know, they got barbecues and steaks and all that, but after that it just becomes a—oof—and so I said to Tim, 'This has got to change, this has gotta change.' He said, 'Well, you should run for chief shop steward. I said, 'What do you mean run?' Because I'd had been the trade steward for like ten years and never went to any meetings or anything, what the hell. But I said, 'Yeah, okay, I'll do that, but I've got to talk to Romeo first' because I already knew him. He was chief shop steward for about, oh, six or seven years and he was a real rabble-rouser, you know. He came out of the woods and conquered addiction by himself and uh—then, of course, eventually turned into an alcoholic, but—and he's dead now, but a wonderful man. He didn't have a lot of book learning, but he knew what was right. He was not afraid of anybody, and he could really rile the troops up when he wanted to. But he said, 'I just don't wanna do this anymore.' I said, 'Fine, I'll do it, okay.' So, that's what I was. I was never elected to anything in that plant. It's always acclamation. Nobody wants the job.

SG [00:47:18] Yeah, no it's basically step forward and—

IF [00:47:20] That's right. If you stand there long enough, you get the job. But we had a lot of shops. When I took the job, we brought in a whole cadre of newer shop stewards, right? Younger people who just thought that, 'Well, you know, we did a pretty good job there with the safety committee. You know, maybe we can do something here.' And I could say the same. People I played ball with and golf with and fished with—

SG [00:47:43] We have a lot of newer people coming into the industry at this time too, just because of the work—

IF [00:47:48] Every summer if it was a good salmon year, you know, they'd hire a couple hundred a day because you hired 200 in the morning, right? Thirty of them were gonna leave at coffee, you know. Another 30 are gonna leave at lunch, and then the next morning you might have a hundred because it's cold. They're always cold. It's fresh fish, even in the cannery. You got to wear rubber all the time and it stinks So, a lot of people just couldn't—just didn't want to do that even though the money was good you know. And you'd talked to the young people later on when I was working for the union and the people that came in like that, you know. I talked to this one woman at Great Northern, and she didn't get hired until I think it was first week August or something, but I was down there on payday for her second check, you know, and I said, 'How do you like the job?' She says, 'You know this job is great. All my friends that went to McDonald's and all those places, you know, I earned more money in three weeks than they did the entire summer. And she's still working, right? Yeah, it's a good gig.

SG [00:48:55] Yeah, right. One of the things about collective bargaining in the fishing industry, I mean it's probably unique, is that fishermen never actually had legislated bargaining. So, they had to go on strike or take some job action in order to get minimum prices. But you did have wage workers and tendermen packers that were wage workers.

IF [00:49:16] Wage earners too, yeah.

SG [00:49:17] And putting those two together in a given year made for a lot of short strikes.

IF [00:49:25] Short strikes are exactly right. That's all I ever saw from '77 until, I forget what year it was, middle 80s sometime when it was a tendermen strike. Because fish had

settled, shore had settled. And so, I assumed it was settled. And I went to work on Monday morning and, jeez, where's all the cars? Nobody told me. And there's a couple of lonely tendermen up front with signs. You know, a lot of them who I knew, so, I went up and chatted with them. Yeah, no, they weren't going for it. It was one of those years they decided, 'Well, let's stiff the tendermen,' you know? Well, it didn't work. But—

SG [00:50:05] I think the idea was that because you had these three different sections, employers often tried to whipsaw them.

IF [00:50:12] Oh, they sure would. Absolutely.

SG [00:50:15] And you certainly saw that with something like that, I would guess. So, tell me what a short strike looks like, because it was usually tied to a salmon run and when that salmon run was going to arrive and so on.

IF [00:50:27] It'd be timed like that and we usually hit the mark and—because, you know, companies are nervous once the fish runs up the river you're done right. And you've already spent a load of money getting ready. I mean one of the old guys there—I can't remember his name right now—but it was one of original companies. BC Packers when I was just—I could not believe the amount of money they were throwing in the river. Yeah, he said 'Irv, this is the way we plan it every single year for herring and for salmon. When we're getting ready for it, don't care. Write as many checks as we have to. Pay as much overtime as we have to. If fish come back, we make money. If fish don't come back, we lose money. That's the name of the game, right?' Okay, fine. So, usually it would come down to a Friday. Usually always a Friday, I don't know why, but it was. And we'd already had a huge strike vote and decided to strike anyways, you know, so everybody'd have a—what I would I call it a ceremonial walk out because you know the whole plant would empty and typically there'd be 800 or a thousand people in the park across the street and the chief shop steward make a speech. Somebody else would make a speech, blah blah blah, and then I'd go pick out—you know make sure I had the guys that I knew were not going back into work—and everybody else would go back into the work, and the rest of us would go set up our pickets. We usually had the schedule already made of who's going where, when, what, you know, but still, it's not easy 24 hours a day.

IF [00:52:01] And we'd do that on Friday afternoon, Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night, Sunday. Usually, we got word by Sunday afternoon that fisherman had settled on a price. Usually, it was Sunday afternoon, occasionally Monday, Sunday night. And, yeah, and always went back to work on the Monday it seemed. And the only people who really lost money were the 30 or so people with me out carrying the signs. But, you know, my speech to the trades, you know, because the trades in the cannery, they had to stay. Maintenance trades on various equipment, they all had to stay. But plumbers, electricians, welders, machinists, I got those guys. I got a few people from the reduction plant and sigilation. They'd whine about it, you know, whine and snivel. Because a lot of them, the younger ones, were used to going into there, into the cannery, because they're always short of people, and work in those big overtime days, right? And the company would pay them their trades rate, you know, because they were so desperate for people. And a lot them were used that. I don't know what happened before I started running it, but I'd always tell them, you know, I'd get them together and go, look, you guys, you're here all year long. These people aren't. You're the highest paid rates in this plant. You should be an example to everyone. Now hold your hat up high and let's go. I'm not going to say what they would tell me. [laughs]

SG [00:53:35] But they did it.

IF [00:53:35] Oh yeah, oh yeah. Well, we had a couple that didn't at one time. And we had one guy. And he came to me and he said, 'Irv—' 'cause I had—he was a janitor. And, you don't need janitors, right? Your washroom and lunchroom is a little bit dirty, so what? Right? We're only here for three days. Any rate, he said, 'oh yeah, the cannery foreman, he wants me to run a table because I ran a table back in the day when I was young,' and blah, blah, blah. You know, a table where you push cans onto the retort buggy layers. Anyways, I said, 'Well, don't go. He said, 'What are you gonna do if I go? What happens to me if I do?' I said, 'If you go, shop stewards will have a trial committee. And simple, we'll decide what to do, okay?' So, he did. We had a trial committee And yeah, shop stewards overrode my objection. I objected with what they passed, but they just passed that he'd have to give all the money back to the Local 8 Education Fund, which is how they paid some lost time for people to go to Harrison, right? And he did. He says, 'Well, what happens if I do? I said, 'Well we can't get you fired, we're not going to get you fired. However, don't expect to ever get one penny out of the benefit plan. You break an ankle and miss some work out on the golf course, because you're a crackerjack golfer.' I said, 'I'm sorry, we won't be paying you.'

SG [00:55:01] That was the—

IF [00:55:02] I don't know if that was legal or not. That's just what I told him. Come on. I never went to any of those courses.

SG [00:55:08] You didn't even know it actually happens?

IF [00:55:09] Yeah, no.

SG [00:55:10] Oh, I see.

IF [00:55:10] No. My local could never—never sent me to any of that stuff. Even after I was shop steward, I never got to go. Because they had to pay my lost time, which was tradesman rate. They could send—they could send two people for me, right? You know, and so they never would, they'd say, 'You know that stuff anyhow. You went to college.' 'So, what? I took a labour law course in the States in 1970. What's that gonna do for me now?' Anyways, yeah, it was quite enjoyable. I loved it, but by 1993 I knew, for me, personally—I got arthritis in both my wrists. I was getting carpal already. I've got two degenerative disks in my back that never are gonna get better, and I don't care. You know, you get up every morning and say this is the best you're gonna feel the rest of your life. Suck it up, buttercup, and away you go, right?