Links in a Chain: Oral Histories of the Puget Sound Freight Lines
by Eleanor Boba

“We’d haul anything anyplace.”

Thus speaks Captain Gabe Ryan in words that might well have been the motto of the venerable freight company. The boats and trucks of Puget Sound Freight Lines were a well-known fixture in our region for decades. Founded in 1919, PSFL outlived many other members of the “mosquito fleet” – the numerous commercial boats that plied the waters of Puget Sound until the middle of the last century.

Today PSFL defines its mission as “supply chain logistics,” trade-speak for getting goods on and off boats. Although it has divested itself of its boats and trucks, it continues to operate shipping terminals on Elliott Bay.

Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society is fortunate to be the recipient of a group of oral history interviews with some of the men who worked for PSFL. These personal histories were collected in the mid-1970s by Clarence Carlander, the second president of PSFL, and his grandson, Spark, in hopes of publishing a company history. The interviews and draft manuscript were eventually passed on to James Lovejoy, son of another company president, Howard Lovejoy, and then on to us – a long chain of storytelling.

Collectively the interviews tell the story of the freight lines. Individually they relate the personal and professional lives of men pursuing maritime careers. Nearly every interview contains some version of the words “Hey, kid, want a job?” From driving the “jitneys” to loading cargo, to running the winch, these young men, often still in high school, learned the ropes. Some went on to become engineers or to command their own boats. Others learned the business end of the business.
Our retired mariners spin tales of the ships – the adventures and the routine, the rewards and the dangers. Along the way we meet characters such as Cap Lovejoy, the company founder; Ma Grimison, owner of a rival shipping company; and Tadpole Zene, a world-class swimmer.

Captain Henry Hellman recalls running the Chimacum into the Duwamish Head while ferrying a load of strawberries from Langley.

One morning we got rudely awakened by our crunching and scraping on the Duwamish Head over there. Seems as though the deckhand had gone to sleep at the wheel. And here were all these cement broken pilings, from the old Luna Park amusement park, coming up through the hull. And of course the strawberries, they got wet. And of course the people came out on the sand:

“What do you got on there?”

“We got strawberries.”

“Well, can we have some?”

“Sure, help yourself.”

As Captain Ryan tells us, the cargo might be anything: mail, produce, lumber, farm equipment, or even furniture.

Jack Jensen recalls sleeping on wrapped sofas from the cargo hold in order to escape the ubiquitous bedbugs aboard.

Mr. Jensen is ably assisted by his wife in recalling details of his career as both driver and boatfather:

Jack: I went to Shelton as combination agent and driver. Did my own delivering, took care of the dock and the books and everything. And I was there for ...

Mrs. J.: Nine years.

Jack: ... several years, and then I got transferred to Bellingham.

Captain Norm Warner recalls the considerable dangers inherent in the operation of the steam boats, including human error, bad weather, fire, and collision. One of the lesser disasters to befall the Skookum Chief happened on the way to Olympia:

I had a standing order with my mates: if you see any danger of any kind, if you get too close to another boat, if you see any fog, call me right away. And many a time I’ve gotten up to the pilot house, nothing on but a pair of shorts. So, that son of a gun [his first mate]… we were just a little bit off of Dockemeyer Point. There’s a rock out there. It got foggy. He never called me. He got over there and darned if he don’t punch a hole in the boat. Pretty good size. Fortunately, most of the freight we had was empty beer bottles.