

Museum of History and Industry
Historical Society of Seattle and King County

Transcript

H.W. McCurdy - taped interview - April 25, 1985
corrected and edited transcript, approved

Side A

This is an interview with H.W. McCurdy on April 25, 1985. The interviewer is Lorraine McConaghy for the Museum of History and Industry.

Q. Would you describe your company in the late thirties?

Mr. McCurdy In the late thirties, we were doing a great deal of work in Alaska, building all the Naval air bases in Alaska. The government started in on a highly - well, I wouldn't say "secret" - but not publicly known project, building all these bases in Alaska two years before the war started. I think we started that in '38.

We were also in the shipbuilding business, here in Seattle, and we were very busy at that time, and for a number of years.

On the job in Alaska, we had 22,000 men coming and going; in the shipyard, we had about 10,000 men - so we had a pretty good-sized payroll.

That was the start of the big rush for World War II. They were anticipating it, apparently. Nobody knew what we were doing in Alaska. It wasn't a top secret, but there wasn't anything done about advertising it.

Q. There was very little publicity.

Mr. McCurdy Very little.

Q. Your shipbuilding - was that for the Navy or the Maritime Commission?

Mr. McCurdy Most of our's, at that time, was for the Navy. We were building destroyers, and guided missile frigates, and different classes of boats.

We actually commissioned five in one day, which was an all-time record.

Q. Heavens! Commissioned, not just launching?

Mr. McCurdy No, commissioned. Five in one day. We were at a pretty fast schedule.

Q. And this is before the beginning of the war?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, we started in, as I say, about two years before the war, getting ready for it. They apparently knew we were going to war. We didn't do any advertising.

I told quite a bit about this in my Don't Leave Any Holidays, Volume II. It's out there at the library at the museum. And I've covered that pretty well in the

book. (Don't Leave Any Holidays, H.W. McCurdy. (Graphic Arts Center, Portland, 1967)

Q. Could you describe the facilities that Puget Sound Bridge and Dredge had here in the Seattle area on the eve of the war?

Mr. McCurdy We had our plant on the West Waterway. We had built Harbor Island - the whole island - which is the largest manmade island in the world at that time. And I think it still is, certainly in the United States.

When they were building it, in 1911 and '12, long before I was with the company, they made the East and West Waterways, dredging the Duwamish River 24 million yards into Harbor Island. We apparently had taken two blocks of it in part payment. Anyway, when I came with the company, we owned two blocks on the west side of Harbor Island, and that's where we were located.

The plant still is located there, although we don't own it anymore. We sold it to Lockheed.

Q. How hard had the Depression been for your firm?

Mr. McCurdy It was tough as the devil. I just walked into it at the worst possible time. I was elected president of the company in September, 1929, and in October, the whole country fell apart! (chuckling) I picked a fine time to do the job, I'll tell you! We got along all right, and we did our job and we came out of it okay, but it was a real tough go.

Q. How were you going about it? Were you scraping for private contracts? for repair contracts?

Mr. McCurdy Any contracts we could get.

Q. Were you building for the Navy way back then?

Mr. McCurdy No, there wasn't any Navy building going on. It was tough going.

We had a diversified background - dredging, general construction, and shipbuilding. And, of the shipbuilding, there wasn't any at that time.

Q. So you were basically working on construction, during the Depression?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, wherever we could get a job.

Q. When did the hard times of the Depression end? Did they end for you long before the war began, with the Navy contracts?

Mr. McCurdy Well, the Depression hit in '29, and '32 and '33 were the worst, and we were coming out about '36.

(a brief pause)

Mr. McCurdy We just worked hard and took cheap work to keep the company going, and to keep the people on the payroll.

Q. That's an issue raised in the history of a much smaller shipyard - Lake Washington Shipyard. They had a lot of trouble keeping their people trained. They would have a contract that would employ a few hundred men, and then there would be nothing. People would go to other shipyards throughout Puget Sound, the machine tools would get rusty. Were you able to keep a consistent employment level or did it go up and down with each contract like that?

Mr. McCurdy We kept a fairly good level. We took on the Lake Washington bridge, for instance, later in the Depression, and that was a big job. We kept a reasonable payroll, but it wasn't one of these flashes where we'd lay everybody off, and then hire them again. We tried to keep the fellows going.

Q. Did you ever have any trouble getting skilled men?

Mr. McCurdy No. They all wanted to work then; what they want now is different.

Q. Were you working through unions after '36? How did unionization come in?

Mr. McCurdy It came in in the shipyard. All the work we did in Alaska, we had no union at all - we did it direct for the Navy, on Naval reservations in Alaska. We worked direct with Washington; we had no inbetween. We didn't have the union there at all.

Later on, of course, we had pretty much gone union. We haven't done any business, you know, for a long time. I retired in 1959, and sold the company in '59. We did some dredging after that for a while, and then we finally quit that.

It's become a private investment company.

Q. The men that you had working up in Alaska, were they Seattle people who were brought up there?

Mr. McCurdy We tried to use Alaska residents, if they were qualified. We were told that this was a very top-secret, high priority job and we needed to get it done.

So, actually, we had to recruit here in Seattle; we had to recruit nationally to get all the men we needed. We had a recruiting office in Minneapolis, and one in the South, and we had as many as 200 letters a day on this business of getting people to come in from the outside.

We couldn't fill any part of the job with people from Alaska. They were mostly fishermen, and we would take them if they were qualified, but they all wanted to go fishing anyway because they could make more money fishing!

(brief pause)

I spoke before the Chamber of Commerce in

Seattle and outlined what we had done up there in comparisons that people could understand, because the quantities were so large that it was hard to understand how big it was. (Mr. McCurdy is looking through Don't Leave Any Holidays.) I gave the talk, and I've got it in here - I want to give you some of those quantities.

"The final contract totaled approximately \$200 million. It challenged every phase of the architectural and engineering professions; it was equally demanding on the ingenuity of the construction industry. Our operations extended for 2300 miles on a direct line to Tokyo. The work, when completed, contained the vast sum of 621 projects of all types, kinds, and descriptions, accounting for several thousand structures."

And you had asked about recruiting people - "During the first year of operations, we were able to secure more of our labor as required from local sources of supply. As the news of this operation became more widely known in the construction industry, many applicants for the jobs came from interested workers living at distant points."

"In the Fall of 1941, indications of a labor shortage became evident, so in conjunction with United States Employment Service, a recruiting program was instituted on a limited basis. Our efforts were confined to the nearby adjoining state where a surplus of manpower was available."

"The scope of our operations eventually reached such a point that it became necessary to recruit labor from every state in the union. A branch office was established in Minneapolis in 1942. The total number of employees hired under this contract was approximately 26,500 - or the equivalent of the population of such cities as Yakima, Everett, and Bellingham.

"The objective of the pertinent facts which I will cite is to give you the magnitude of the work."

And then I went into these various things on the magnitude of the work - you can get this book out at the museum, if you wish.

Q. It's surprises me - it's an admirable thing - that coming out of the Depression, your firm was able to handle a project of this complexity and magnitude.

Mr. McCurdy We did.

"The original design called for permanent construction and centralization of facilities. Then came the declaration of war, and rapid change in job procedure. Permanent construction was changed to temporary construction, and our engineering department exercised all the usual operations of a typical engineering office, the difference being that this engineering department was in itself an integrated organization."

"This department coordinated the activities of all the departments, and was made up of 250 employees. In four years the engineering department produced approximately 8000 drawings, requiring 300,000 square feet of tracing paper which would produce some six million square feet of prints. It was sufficient to cover 120 acres, or if you do not wish to use paper to protect a strawberry patch, you can paper the

walls of 5000 five room houses of average size."

"The preparation of these drawings consumed 30,000 lead pencils which placed end to end would represent a strip of lead four miles long."

"Thirty five million pounds of reinforcing steel were detailed by the engineers. If this steel were rolled into quarter inch rod, it would extend in excess of 40,000 miles. This is sufficient steel to provide shrinkage reinforcement for a 20 feet wide concrete highway extending from Seattle to Dutch Harbor."

"These same engineers checked and detailed thirty million pounds of structural steel."

"The buildings covered a floor area of eight million square feet, or approximately 100 square city blocks." That's all in here, if you want to get it. The wages are in here, and the whole business.

Q. Did you do any building on Attu and Kiska, the islands later taken by the Japanese?

Mr. McCurdy We had conceived this idea - We landed on bare beaches, you see, and started from that. Well, you had to have someplace to put the men. We bought three steamers, the YALE, for example - the YALE and HARVARD used to be on the run from Los Angeles to San Francisco - and we bought the NORTHWESTERN - one of the ships that ran to Alaska - and we bought the VICTORIA, which used to run here.

We outfitted each of them, making it complete with sleeping, and food, and steam for generators. When we landed on the beach, we were ready to go to work! That was later adopted by the Navy, but we did it first. We built a lot of these barges with everything on them for living.

When the Japs came over the first time at Dutch Harbor, it was early in the morning, and they took the oil tanks. The men were all asleep in the post sleep. With the noise, they got out and went in the fox holes.

When they came over again, they hit the ship. They could have killed everybody.

We were the only outfit in the continental United States and Alaska under attack. We shot down a Zero. We had anti-aircraft around us - the Navy put it around.

One of the interesting things to me was that, every night, Tokyo Rose would broadcast what we were doing on Kodiak Island and have it right! Now how she could do that, I have no idea.

Q. You never found out?

Mr. McCurdy We never found out. Navy intelligence never found out. And it was upsetting to our men - she was telling them what we did that day.

Anyway, we shot down a Zero. And there are no secrets. There just aren't any.

I thought this was like Hanford. I personally was notified from Washington - top-secret - to dismantle the plane and ship it to California where it was later re-assembled, and it flew. They had been trying to get

ahold of a Zero, because apparently it was a better plane than any we had, and this was the first one they could get ahold of.

We did that, and I thought nobody knew about it but me. I was walking down the street (in Seattle) and some fellow - a friend of mine - stopped me, and said, "Hey, Mac! I hear you shot down a Zero and you're shipping it from Dutch Harbor!" (chuckling)

There is no such thing as a secret!

Fortunately, we didn't lose any men, but if they had taken the ship first, we would have lost them all. Fortunately, they took the oil tanks.

Q. Going back a little bit, you were talking about a large engineering department. Out of the Depression, throughout the shipbuilding industry, there was a shortage of skilled men...

Mr. McCurdy Well, this wasn't the shipbuilding industry. This was building contract work.

Q. Well, just a minute - Along with that, there was a shortage of trained engineers and management personnel. I would think it would be similar in the construction industry. You still would have had a long time when not much was done, and then activity went up dramatically.

Mr. McCurdy Yes, but you want to realize that there were a lot of skilled people looking for a job just after the Depression. There were a lot of people still unemployed.

Q. How did they get their skills? Were they college graduates?

Mr. McCurdy Well, it depends. You have every kind of a man - you have plumbers, carpenters, and steel workers, and none of those fellows are college men. They were skilled workmen.

Q. But you were needing to recruit them from all over the country.

Mr. McCurdy We covered the whole country.

Q. What I'm getting at is especially after Lend-Lease was enacted, and the whole area - not just Puget Sound, but California, the Great Lakes, and the Eastern Seaboard - began producing for defense, not just ships and tanks, but production of all kinds, there was a shortage -

Mr. McCurdy I told you. We recruited them all over the United States.

Q. Did you not institute any training programs?

Mr. McCurdy Hell, no! We had to go to work. We had no time for programs. This was a hush-hush job and a hurry-up job.

The fellows on the job could learn something and be advanced on the job, but we didn't go out and run schools and programs. We didn't have time for that. This was a top-secret, top-flight, first-come job.

Q. In your shipyard, as well, you had no need for welding training school, through the union?

Mr. McCurdy You have to understand that these things grow. You just don't start right off with the whole 25,000 men. You start with a couple hundred of men, and it goes.

But we never ran any schools anywhere.

Q. The government training schools that were in Kirkland and in downtown Seattle - these were not part of a plan that you used to bring people into your industry.

Mr. McCurdy We went to them direct through recruiting offices. When we started, we got most of them in the states of Washington and Oregon - right around here. And we would go and go and go until we were recruiting all over the country.

Q. Did you ever find yourself employing women in the shipyard?

Mr. McCurdy In the shipyard, yes, but not in Alaska. It was not the right kind of a job, and it was pretty early for employing women, too.

We did this work in the Alaska climate, and it was about as tough work as you can do, even for a man let alone a woman. Women would be in the office, of course.

We had women welders down here, and that sort of thing, in this climate.

You have to understand that this was a top-secret, hurry-up job - everything had to be done just as fast as we could do it. And we had to do it the best we could. It was top-secret - they were getting ready for war. The country didn't know that. When I gave this talk (mentioned above), there were guys right here who hardly knew anything about it, and the contract was done!

(Here follows an additional quote from the talk.)

"The contributions of H.W. McCurdy and his company to the war effort were covered in considerable detail in Volume I. Since then a copy of a talk given by him to the Seattle business and industrial leaders during that time has come to light. The way it illustrated massive dredging and construction contracts in terms easily understood by laymen impressed the editors of the Seattle Times who commented as follows: 'With the war yet to be won, it is hardly surprising that some major news events have passed unheeded. It is even less surprising when it is remembered that there are restrictions which the newspapers have voluntarily adhered to in the interests of security for those whose peril is already great - the fighting forces in particular. Some of the news parade has passed by unseen, except by a few. Many have known that something was going on here and there and in a

vague way, have pondered this bit of information, and certain evidence of their own eyes. Many of the great stories are still untold. A reminder has been given graphically at the Community Council luncheon of the Chamber of Commerce when H.W. McCurdy narrated a part of the tremendous undertaking in Alaska work, now completed. Many of his listeners had heard nothing of this story before. Some of those whose affairs were one way or another entwined in those wartime accomplishments knew about one detail or another, but all were forcibly impressed by the straightforward, able presentation by that part of a great wartime development by Seattle's own pioneer Puget Sound Bridge and Dredging Company, headed by the noontime speaker who played a leading part.'" And so on.

That's the talk where I purposely put all this in a way that you could understand.

Q. How long did the contract take for the Mercer Island Floating Bridge?

Mr. McCurdy Two years.

Q. And it opened in '40?

Mr. McCurdy Yes.

Q. So you were doing this at the same time as the Alaska contracts.

Mr. McCurdy We had a lot of people on the payroll.

Q. I guess!

Was that contract in any way related to preparing this area for war?

Mr. McCurdy No.

Q. What was the motivation?

Mr. McCurdy To get people on and off Mercer Island.

Q. Not by ferry, though. (chuckling)

Mr. McCurdy Strange thing about it, though, is that the people on Mercer Island didn't want the bridge. And as soon as the bridge was done, everybody wanted to move to Mercer Island.

Q. In the P-I, in 1942, there's an article about whether the Game Commission was going to allow deer hunting on Mercer Island that year! There were enough deer there to make it worthwhile to hunt them.

Mr. McCurdy I built my home on Mercer Island, and moved in the day after Pearl Harbor. I bought the property years before, but I wouldn't go to Mercer Island until they had a bridge. I wasn't going to ride the boat - I couldn't.

My business wasn't office hours. Hell! I'd

be working any old hours! I couldn't ride on a steamboat, back and forth.

So as soon as I could, when I knew the bridge was going to be done, I started building the house. We lived there forty years, and just moved into town recently, three years ago.

It was a beautiful place, on the waterfront.

Q. You mentioned Pearl Harbor, and I would like to ask you how you remember that day.

Mr. McCurdy I can remember that day all right. I was on a ferry coming from Port Townsend to Seattle, and I heard it on the radio.

Q. Were you surprised? Had you expected it?

Mr. McCurdy Well, I wasn't qualified to know. I was too busy doing other things, and I figured somebody else had to do that sort of thing. I think I was surprised that the Japs were vicious enough to try a deal like that.

I think we messed it up terribly. We had broken the Jap code, no question about that. I think it was terribly handled, but that's just my own personal opinion.

Q. The early accounts of the damage at Pearl Harbor were not complete. You were in kind of a privileged position. Did you realize to what extent the Navy had been destroyed?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, I did. It so happened, you see, that all the work in Alaska was headquartered here at Bremerton. The officer in charge lived at Bremerton, and he used to spend every Tuesday in my office, and that was it - one day a week, and we'd do the whole damn thing!

He got all the information, and we knew it was just as bad as it was. In fact, his son, was on the NEVADA, but he wasn't killed; he was injured.

But I wasn't involved in any of the details of Pearl Harbor - it was just a question of what I'd heard.

Q. After Pearl Harbor, when President Roosevelt - and we already had been given enormous responsibility for production in 1942 - after Pearl Harbor was bombed, the production was upped a great deal in tonnage of ship production, and many other things. Did your job change? Did your company change because of our entry into war?

Mr. McCurdy No, we didn't change much. We were pretty well into it before we had war. We'd had a lot of this kind of work going on - and some of it was pretty top secret. When we finished all that work for the Navy in Alaska, then we took on the DEW line - the early warning radar along the Arctic Ocean, from Point Barrow to the McKenzie River - eight hundred miles. And the best trained fellows that we had up there, we just switched over to that other job. That was the toughest job we ever had - the DEW line.

Q. The living conditions must have been very difficult.

Mr. McCurdy They were.

 The construction was all non-magnetic, and when we built the housing units, we assembled them completely here, took them down and then shipped them. You see, if you got them up there and there was a screw missing, there wasn't any place to buy a screw. When we sailed out of here, we had the largest convoy to ever go to Alaska - we had icebreakers, and ice pilot, and everything else to get into there. We had just thirty days to get all that stuff in. After we got in, we did it all with cargo planes. That was really a tough job, but we were well equipped for it. The top people we had working on the air base work were available to us. It worked out fine.

Q. It sounds as though your shipbuilding operation here during the war - the destroyers - was perhaps less than half of the total thrust of the company...

Mr. McCurdy Yes. Less than half.

 This one contract ran two hundred million dollars. The DEW line ran another hundred million dollars. So that was three hundred million dollars of work we had.

Q. Did you have much involvement in the shipbuilding side of the business?

Mr. McCurdy Who do you think ran this outfit?

Q. I didn't know how much you had delegated...

Mr. McCurdy Well, I delegated authority, of course. But as Truman said, "The buck stopped here." Right on that desk - right there.

 Somebody has to run it.

Q. You had been accustomed to having a Navy presence in your shipyard since you had been working on Navy contracts for a couple of years. What was that like - to have cost inspectors, work inspectors in the yard working with the men? In your office, working with you?

Mr. McCurdy We had no problems. Very fortunately - and I don't say this about all Navy officers; they're human just like we are - but we had the finest officer in charge of shipbuilding in this area that you could possibly have - Admiral Homer Wallin. A top-flight gentleman and knew his business.

 Wallin was in the shipbuilding business; Captain Thomas was in construction.

 They were just absolutely top-flight men.

Side B

Mr. McCurdy ...he'd say, "'First class,' yes, but we're not going to go to a quarter of an inch of this and a quarter of an inch of that - get the damn thing done!"

 Well, you can work for people like that.

Admiral Wallin was the same way. We became good friends as well as working for him. He was my boss. Wallin would call me up on the phone and he'd say, "Mac, I'd like to come over and see you. When can I come?"

And I'd say when, and he'd come over and see me. Ordinarily, those officers call up and say, "McCurdy! You'd better get over here - I want to see you!" But not Wallin, no, sir.

And when I wanted to see him, I'd call him up and say, "Admiral, I'd like to come over." Or "Captain," then.

We were just so fortunate to have those two men and we had them for a long time.

Q. I'm so interested to hear that.

Mr. McCurdy Well, the top people have a lot to do with it, you know.

Q. Did you know Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher?

Mr. McCurdy No, only by name. I never met him. He was in a different end of the Navy than I was. I was in the construction end of the Navy; he was in the operations end.

The funny thing about this, too, to me is that whenever we would launch a ship, the Navy would send out a full crew about thirty days ahead of time to break in with our people when we were making the trial runs and so forth, which was right.

But in my assessment, I would pick out one of these officers that I thought couldn't miss making admiral! They were just top-flight fellas! Absolutely!

And not one of them made admiral. Now I can't understand that. Either I don't understand men or there must be something wrong with the promotion system in the Navy. Not one of them made admiral that they sent out to get those ships, and several of them I didn't think could miss. I can't pick them.

Q. You've done all right!

Mr. McCurdy Well, in my business, but I can't pick Navy.

Q. Well, it must be different in the Navy, with Annapolis and that "old boy" network...

Mr. McCurdy Yes, and, too, when they have those fitness reports, if one of them crosses a higher officer and he gives him a mark on his fitness report, he isn't going to make it.

I'm not proposing what you can do to change the system. But the system isn't very good as it is, in my opinion.

Q. The destroyers that you were building - was it the same hull again and again and again with lots of change orders?

Mr. McCurdy No. One of the reasons that people don't understand -

I think the Defense Department pays way too much for what they get, because they make it so damn difficult to do the work for them.

It was very seldom that you had two just the same - very seldom. We had one, for example, the only one built - an inshore fire support ship - which was a rocket ship. The whole forward deck of it was rockets, and you'd use it for pulverizing the beaches before the Marines landed.

We designed that one, as well - that's the only ship we ever designed. The rest of them, we did the engineering, but somebody else designed them.

Q. You designed that in-house?

Mr. McCurdy Right, in-house. It was the only one, and a top-secret deal. The firepower of those rockets on the forward end of that little ship was about equal to the gunpower of the NEW JERSEY or the MISSOURI. It was a solid sheet of flame when they'd make a landing.

Q. I've never - What's the name of that ship? Do you recall?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, it's right there. CARRONADE. See that little cannon there? (referring to a model on Mr. McCurdy's desk)

This isn't going to get in the papers, now...

Q. Nope. This is for the museum.

Mr. McCurdy I'm very frank with you, and I don't want any arguments in the papers.

Q. So that rocket ship was a very unusual construction?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, very unusual. They used it in the Korean War, also.

Q. Was it used in the South Pacific landings on the islands, or was it intended for the home islands invasion, that never happened?

Mr. McCurdy I don't know where they used it. It was for the Marines, when they went ashore.

Q. Talking about top-secret kinds of things, did you have a Navy Stores building where the radar was issued from, and other secret kinds of things?

Mr. McCurdy I don't know just how to answer your question. We were given a set of plans to do something, and it was up to us to do it. If they didn't like the way we were doing it, they could tell us. If they liked the way we did it, they could give us a little lift.

Q. Was there much concern in your yard about espionage or sabotage? Were there security precautions?

Mr. McCurdy Oh, sure, but we didn't have any trouble.
The only thing we had was Tokyo Rose telling our people what
they did, every night.

I've never been able to figure that out.

Never.

Q. I bet you've thought about it a lot.

Mr. McCurdy Yeah. Well, as I told you, shooting down
that Zero - I thought it was as top-secret as Hanford, and
then a guy on the street - ! (laughing) There's no such thing
as a secret.

Q. People have loose lips. They can't keep something to
themselves if they think it's a good story.

Mr. McCurdy Not if they think it's something worth
telling.

Q. You were building destroyers down here in Seattle?

Mr. McCurdy We built all kinds of ships. Guided missile
frigates, destroyers, a lot of minesweepers, and convoy
vessels. And I can't remember how many we built for the
British - a whole fleet of them for the British. They sent
their officers out from England.

One of the things I got a kick out of - the
Navy, when they design something, you do it the way it's
designed. It wasn't up to us to do anything about it - we
did what they told us.

Among other things, we had to put on those
British ships the finest coffee makers you could get. Well,
they don't drink coffee; they drink tea. And I think that by
the time they got out to Cape Flattery, those things had been
given the deep six. But we had to put them on there, because
the Navy said to give it to them.

The worst thing we had - and I just don't
condone it at all - is if we were building a Navy ship, and
one of these damn Russian freighters came in, we had to
overhaul it. Actually, we were told, if necessary, to take
parts out of our own ships and put them on those cargo ships
of the Russians!

They had straw mattresses, they got
everything. In addition to that, when they got off of
Kodiak, they'd usually get in bad order. We had a base at
Kodiak, and our orders were to take care of them first.
Roosevelt went clear out on Uncle Joe - we'd actually take
parts off our own ships and put them on these damn
freighters! They'd go out of here - they'd never slept so
well, never ate so well, and everything else, and damned if
they didn't stop at Kodiak and do it again!

Q. You surprise me.

Mr. McCurdy That went on all the time. We didn't like
it at all, but there wasn't anything we could do. It was
orders.

Q. Overhauling these Russian ships - were you fitting them for troop ships?

Mr. McCurdy No, just repairs. Just running repairs, that's all. They were just a bunch of junk anyway. They hadn't been kept up, but we did everything they wanted.

Our orders were to take care of them. I didn't agree with this at all, but that was my orders I was working under.

Roosevelt, see, wanted to give Stalin every damn thing he wanted. He thought he could control Uncle Joe...

Q. Speaking about international affairs of that kind, in your privileged position, did you know about Hanford? You've mentioned Hanford - did you know...?

Mr. McCurdy No, I didn't know anything about Hanford. We never built anything at Hanford - bid a couple of jobs and didn't get them.

Q. That's interesting - was there real competitive bidding during the war, or was it a sort of hurry up process?

Mr. McCurdy We had competitive bidding. We built, as I told you, this rocket ship on cost-plus, because we'd designed it and it was something that had never been before, but the rest we bid on plans.

That's what I don't understand now. They can't take any work here because the unions have got a higher scale than they have on the Gulf Coast or the East Coast. What are they going to do about it?

The unions say, "Well, you've got to give us work anyway."

We ran a shipyard for all those years with the same differential against us that they've got now, and we got most of our work on competitive bidding, and did it, and made money. If the unions don't get off their high horse, they ought not to get any work here.

Q. During the war the unions became extremely strong here... All the shipyards were closed shops, and they had wages that, compared to the wages of 1937, were fantastic.

How was the city of Seattle changed by the war?

Mr. McCurdy I don't really know. I was so busy doing other things. It seemed that, like Topsy, it grew. I can't answer that very well.

Q. Did you have any perspective at all, then, on the Japanese-American internment here from Seattle?

Mr. McCurdy None whatever. I didn't know anything about it. Too busy doing other things.

Q. Did your methods and techniques of ship manufacture change during the war. In other shipyards, there came to be

more of a unit-assembly method -

Mr. McCurdy Yes, sub-assemblies. We all went into that - as big as the cranes would handle. You could get work done faster that way, when you could pick a whole section up and set it in the dock and weld it into the ship. You can do it a lot easier on shore than you can down on the drydock.

Q. Did you rely a lot more on welding than riveting?

Mr. McCurdy It was all welding.

Q. Had that been the case during the thirties in your yard?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, welding came in after World War I. What brought in electric welding was that the German sabotaged so many ships - they put junk in the cylinders of the engines, and roll them over, and break the cylinders.

When we took over a ship that was interned here, and the crew was on her, electric welding made it possible to put that stuff back together.

Welding was coming along strong. We were one of the first to be able to use a steel hull and an aluminum house. To weld aluminum to steel was a very intricate thing, though it's done all the time now. We were in on the beginning of that. We were working every way we could to get the job done and make some money.

Q And to make it go faster, because -

Mr. McCurdy That's the only way you make any money.

Q. At Lake Washington Shipyards, the space between keel-laying and launching got shorter and shorter and shorter, and then between launching and commissioning got shorter and shorter, too, as they became better at it.

Mr. McCurdy Yes, we all learned.
We commissioned five ships in one day.

Q. Did you get to go out on many of the trial runs?

Mr. McCurdy I went on many of them. Not the little boats, but all of the big boats.

We won the Army-Navy "E" award which is the highest [production award] possible.

I just want to see if I can't find out...
(Mr. McCurdy is leafing through his book) In accepting the "E", I said, "We have labored earnestly and long to earn this recognition. Undoubtedly, that is why the realization is doubly sweet. From this plant, during the past twelve months, we have delivered 32 vessels to the Navy - an average of one completed ship each eleven and a half days. During the past quarter, which ended October 1, we have delivered one completed ship every ten days, while at this moment, we will lay the keel of still another vessel, the first of its type built in the yard."

That's a pretty good record.

Q. It sure is.

Mr. McCurdy One every ten days, or one every eleven and a half days.

Q. Did you have trouble maintaining that pace, with the shortages and priorities? Did the War Production Board ever get in your way?

Mr. McCurdy No, War Production never got in our way. We had one hell of time getting engines for this bunch we were to send to England. We had six or seven ships in the water, and couldn't get any engines. We weren't furnishing the engines - they were being furnished by the government. We paddled our own canoe as best we could.

We were blessed in having two top-flight bosses. They didn't give us anything - they got everything that the Navy was supposed to get. But they were gentlemen to work for. There was nothing sloppy. They didn't let us do anything sloppy, but it was a pleasure to work for people who know what they want.

Q. And they were able to get you the priorities you needed so that you could meet your contracts and build these boats in a timely way?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, that's right. It didn't always work out so easily as that, but then we did pretty good. Once we had six or seven ships in the water, waiting for government furnished material to get here.

Q. Those ships - would they've been Lend-Lease ships for Britain?

Mr. McCurdy I guess they were Lend-Lease. They went to Britain. I don't know who paid for them. They were lovely little ships.

Q. Was there any trouble with the work inspectors? At Lake Washington Shipyards, from time to time, there were... People slugging the weld, or stealing material, or whatever.

Mr. McCurdy Oh, yes, you always had some of that. The human race is what it is. We couldn't reform the human race because they were working for us. You'll have some of those people wherever you go.

Q. This county grew enormously during the war - you were too busy to notice it- but there was a tremendous increase in population.

Mr. McCurdy I presume there was - I don't know much about that.

Q. There was a boom of all kinds - retail businesses, housing projects. The boom that you would have perceived must have been in contracts, and among the building

fraternity here in Seattle, there was a lot of government contracts at that time. Did you perceive that as a temporary boom or did you think there was a way that Seattle could build on its wartime experience?

Mr. McCurdy I don't know about Seattle. All I know is that we made up our mind that we were going to stay in business when the war was over and we did. A lot of people folded up when the war was over. We actually had more business for some years after the war than we had during the war, as far as the shipyard was concerned.

 I don't know anything about Seattle building up and all that sort of thing.

 Our company built the Dexter Horton Building, and I was with the company, but I had nothing to do with the building. I was superintendent on the Wilsonian Apartments, in the University District - that was the only building job I was ever on.

 Most of my work with the company when I was in the field was in the dredging department.

 We built the Securities Market Building, for Charlie Clise, and the High School Stadium.

 Of course, the company, before my time, built the University Stadium. That was in 1919, and I didn't come with the company until 1922.

 There are marks of the company all around the town, including, as I told you, Harbor Island which is the industrial center of the town, now.

Q. Was there a planning department within the company that planned for the post war period? for the change that was going to come after the war? There was one in Boeing...

Mr. McCurdy Well, we did what we could about that, if we were going to stay in business. We tried to plan what was coming up, what we could do and what we could keep going on.

Q. Were you directing yourselves toward a civilian economy or did you expect to continue working for the government?

Mr. McCurdy I didn't expect to continue working for the government. I figured we had to get some civilian business, as far as we were concerned. We always had some government business, either in construction, dredging, or shipbuilding. We built some Navy ships after the war.

 We just scratched like hell, wherever we could go.

Q. For a lot of people, the Second World War was the busiest four years of their lives.

Mr. McCurdy Yes, I suppose it was.

Q. Did you get involved in any civil defense things? Anything outside of your work?

Mr. McCurdy You mean me, personally?

Q. Yes, you.

Mr. McCurdy No, I had plenty of fish to fry without that.

Q. What were your days like? How busy were they?

Mr. McCurdy Well, it's pretty hard for me to tell. I worked so hard, I had a nervous breakdown finally. I drove too hard.

Q. That's a shame. I'm sorry.

Mr. McCurdy I pulled out of it. This was about 1939. Things were going pretty good and I went out to Tahiti for a while and stayed there. I went to Mayo's and they told me that I had had a nervous breakdown. I didn't know what it was - I knew I didn't feel well all the time. They told me I had to take a year off, and I couldn't do that. And I had to do something, but it was pretty hard to do at that time.

There's a lot of water that's gone under the bridge in my lifetime.

Q. What is your strongest memory of the war years?

Mr. McCurdy Just working like hell

Q. Did you have good people working with you, in your own company?

Mr. McCurdy I wouldn't have kept them there if I hadn't. Why would I keep them if they weren't good?

Q. Sorry.

Did you have an opinion of the press coverage here in Seattle during the wartime?

Mr. McCurdy I think they did very well about it, as I read in this piece here that the papers had voluntarily restricted publishing this stuff. This fellow said that nobody knew what we'd been doing.

I'm sure that they did very well, and I'm sure the press really cooperated. Some of that, they had to do, but I think most was voluntary. They were asked to, and they did it.

Q. Concerning unions, were there ever any work stoppages or any strikes at your yard during the war?

Mr. McCurdy There was one national strike in the shipyards, and everybody had to get in on that one. And we were in on that one, but we never had a company strike. We got along with the unions pretty well.

I had a fellow who handled all our union negotiations. It takes a particular kind of man to do that. They've got to know what they're talking about, and they would drag on and on and on. Sometimes two or three months, down in San Diego. I never spent any time on it - I

couldn't. And I trusted him. He was the best in the business.

I used to tell him, "Don't call me up on the telephone and tell me about what you're doing, or anything else. When you bring a contract up here, and put it on my desk, I'll sign it. That's all I want to know about it. You're smarter than I am and it's your job and that's it."

He did a tremendous job. He just died recently. He was the best union negotiator a private plant could have. I could trust him completely. All the rest of them would have to phone headquarters and see if they could go for this or go for that, and I told him, "When you come and put it on my desk, I'll sign it, but I don't want to hear any more about it."

They'd just go on and on and on for a month or two, sitting around talking about what they were going to do. I had some darn good men.

Q. Do you know whether there was a Labor-Management Committee in your shipyard?

Mr. McCurdy Yes, I recall that we had that.

Q. Do you know what kinds of matters were discussed?

Mr. McCurdy No, I didn't sit in on them.

Q. Did you yourself or any of your people end up having to get involved in any of the deliberations in Washington, DC, testifying before Congressional subcommittees, the War Production Board, the War Manpower Commission, any of these offices?

Mr. McCurdy No, we didn't.

Q. It sounds like Wallin and Thomas trusted you.

Mr. McCurdy Sure, they trusted me implicitly. They recognized somebody that was square and honest, and they could trust him. They had other fish to fry, too.

One thing about Captain Thomas (chuckling), on Tuesday mornings, I had a radiator in my office and he'd always clean his pipe by banging it on the radiator! And I'd have to have the damn thing cleaned up every Tuesday evening because he always banged the thing on the radiator.

Q. An old salt.

Mr. McCurdy Yes. (chuckling)
We just were plain lucky.

Q. Did you have any perspective on the war in the Pacific? For the first year or so, it was going quite badly. There was a lot of pressure on people to produce...

Mr. McCurdy We had battle-damaged ships coming in for repairs. Terrible, just terrible, some of them...

Q. It has seemed to me, in reading the newspapers at the time, that the war went on and on and on. People were expecting it to end, and it just didn't - the war in the Pacific in particular...

Mr. McCurdy Well, see, you want to remember this. Mr. Roosevelt, in his infinite wisdom, decided to forget the Pacific, we're going to settle Europe first. He gave everything to the European theatre.

He wanted to give everything to Uncle Joe. The strategy of the war was to finish Europe first, and then take on the Pacific.

Q. So you would say that they were basically fighting a holding action in the Pacific.

Mr. McCurdy Yes, that's what they were.

I personally feel that there was no reason for the debacle at Pearl Harbor because there's no question but that they'd broken the Japanese code. It was a Sunday, and they couldn't find General Marshall, and they couldn't find a lot of people. I think it was an unnecessary fiasco.

Q. You're not alone in thinking that President Roosevelt either knew what was going to happen at Pearl, or deliberately permitted it to occur.

Mr. McCurdy Exactly. In my opinion, that's exactly right, but that's just my opinion.

That gave him the chance to get us into war.

Q. What did you think of his handling of economic matters in the thirties?

Mr. McCurdy Well, I didn't think much of it, myself. I didn't think he knew very much about economics himself.

I was in on all that business - on the NRA. He had General Johnson running it.

Q. You were involved in that? How interesting!

Mr. McCurdy Well, I was one of the fellows that organized a -- In 1932, I was second president of the Mountain Pacific Chapter of the AGC. (Associated General Contractors), and that was what we had on our end of it, because we had the N.R.A. on the other side of it. I was in that. I was president of the outfit here in Seattle, in the state of Washington.

Q. Did you think the Depression would end on its own?

Mr. McCurdy I felt it would have ended a lot sooner if they had left it alone.

Q. Explain what you mean...

Mr. McCurdy We were starting to recover, and we went way

further than we needed to. They restricted us so much on everything that it was hard to get the thing going again on a commercial basis. We'd been so tied up with government and regulations and inspectors and every other damn thing that it was hard to get back on a basis of commercial business.

Q. Did you feel that free enterprise was very restricted?

Mr. McCurdy I did.