

**They are seldom found at home in their modest, middle-class houses,**

*Dockside*

*with*

*Longshoremen*

BY JILL BARTLETT

Long on work, and short on relationship, the docks are home to longshoremen.

but when they are, they are either sleeping or waiting for the phone to ring. They own two cars, one economical clunker to get them to and from work, and a newer vehicle, the limited edition, in case they go someplace besides work. They are longshoremen, the yard and dock workers in the ports of Virginia.

Virginia is home to the second largest port in the eastern United States, Virginia International Terminals. Millions of dollars worth of imports and exports pass through these terminals on any given day of the week. The Port of Hampton Roads supports the Commonwealth of Virginia by providing approximately 165,000 jobs with a \$4.8 billion payroll, and pays \$667 million in taxes. These ports are the nation's most efficient transportation networks, serving over one hundred thirty trucking companies and two of the nation's largest railroads, CSX and Norfolk Southern. VIT has recently embarked on a \$400 million massive growth plan to be implemented during the next ten years.

Sophisticated equipment and computer technology expedite the shipping process as man-operated equipment loads or unloads the heavy containers. Brute strength is still required to handle "bull work"—the arrival or departure of coffee beans, cocoa beans, or tobacco requiring special handling. Men usually accept the more difficult jobs, particularly in the handling of bull or hazardous cargo, and women usually decline these jobs—even though there is a higher pay rate.

Longshoremen have their own way of life stemming from long, unpredictable hours, dangerous work, and the multiplicity of job types through various stevedoring companies. Long working hours and consecutive days away from home create a strain on their personal lives as frustrated wives cook dinners that go uneaten and sports games or school events lack parents cheering for their children. Nine-year-old Mark stayed after school for one hour, three days a week, for two months, practicing for an

upcoming chorus performance. The morning of the program, a Sunday, his mom called from work to tell him she couldn't get home, her job was rolling on doubles and she just couldn't give up that much money for a two-hour performance. Mark understood; he's used to it; his mom has to work.

During the months of August and September of a contract negotiation year, longshoremen work every chance they get. Rejection of the union contract could mean a strike and months without work. Gary, a longshoreman for almost forty years, remembers a strike right after he was hired. To provide food for his family, he painted houses and did other odd jobs for neighbors. Both his family and his wife's family belonged to the striking union so they couldn't rely on extended family members for help. Once you've experienced being hungry for days on end, you don't forget.

Monday through Friday, longshoremen never know when or if they will be working. On Friday, they choose jobs for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Weekend work is good for overtime and double-time. The yard and dock longshoremen work "off the board," meaning hiring clerks call longshoremen by seniority every weekday between 3 and 9 p.m., offering a job for the next day. During this hiring period, longshoremen obsessively check their cell phones for a signal and charged battery so they don't miss their call. Marie and her brother, Eric, remember getting their "butts whooped" if they used the telephone before their Dad got a job for the next day. If the hiring clerk called they were both trained to ask the right questions, making sure they hired their Dad on the ship that would make the most money. If they accepted the wrong job, their Dad rehearsed hiring practices with them for the rest of the night so they would get it right the next time.

While there really isn't a "safe" job to take, most longshoremen accept the risks of their profession. Fifty-foot tall cranes, hustlers, top-loaders, and transtainers thirty-feet high move and lift cargo containers around the yard and dock. These containers vary in size from twenty feet long to forty feet long and are either six feet or nine feet high. Maximum weight of the forty's is 67,300 pounds. Accustomed to the sights and sounds of the job, workers focus on their jobs of the day, ignoring the fact that 67,300 pounds is hanging above their heads or moving close beside their station. Accidents and injuries often occur but are seldom talked about. They don't make the local papers or news stations. One employee explained, "We don't air our laundry in public. Shit happens and you just got to deal with it." The hazards of being a longshoreman are accepted, even expected by some. Curtis is both a ship's lasher and a labor union delegate. His delegate position often requires him to wear a suit and tie. "It would be my luck," Curtis explains, "to get killed in a car wreck on the way to work in that damn suit, no one around who knows

you, I'm all alone. At least at work, I got friends and family all around—and I'm not wearing a damn tie!"

Many on-the-job accidents result in insurance settlements for the employee's heirs. One longshoreman recalls an accident that occurred about a year or so ago, as a man lashed containers on a cargo ship. As containers get stacked in the hull of a vessel, long metal pins are lashed to secure the four corners of a forty-foot container to the container beneath it, either another forty-foot container or two twenty-foot containers. Twenty-foot containers are never placed on the top of a forty-foot, even if they are to be unloaded first, because there is no way to secure the middle corners and slippage can occur—tumbling containers can damage a ship once underway and will also kill a person instantly if he or she is caught in the hull. Anyway, he continues, this guy was just doing his job when one of the pins caught in his overalls and threw him from the deck of the ship down to the bottom of the hull, approximately a one-hundred to one-hundred and fifty foot drop. Work stopped so emergency vehicles could get his body out of the ship. Another time, a worker was just standing on the dock, doing his job, and the next thing any one knew, he was caught between two hustlers carrying containers. Crushed him, just like that.

Sleep-deprivation provides yet another hazard on the docks. Yard or dock workers average working anywhere from sixty to one-hundred-twenty hours a week. They claim to be conditioned to cat-nap rests during a lunch or dinner one-hour break. Longshoremen refute the statistical claim that sleep-deprivation slows their reflexes or interrupts their concentration in performing their job. Sam, a foreman for one of the stevedoring companies, left his house Friday morning at 5:45 (he had gotten off work Thursday at 11 p.m.) and didn't come home again until Monday at 4 p.m. "Hell, it was great!" he said, "I made \$2,500 that weekend alone." He got the job done, but he doesn't remember the drive home.

Longshoremen's children attend private schools, dress in GAP or Limited Too clothing, and attend the best childcare centers in the area. These kids have all the trendy toys, playrooms stocked with a computer, at least one TV and two or three video game systems (one TV for watching, the other for gaming). Longshoremen also support the neighborhood by employing teenagers to care for their children while they work at night. Lynne complained that she once went for a whole week without seeing her children (they did talk on the phone). She admitted, "I have to work to support them, they understand that." These longshoremen work to provide for their families so they can have the best. Best clothes. Best schools. Best education.

There exists little life outside the Port for most of these

workers. Longshoremen work every job allowed and set personal goals to challenge themselves (like setting a goal of working one hundred hours one week or making \$3000 in one week). Often they compete with one another (\$100 goes to the winner) to see who can work more hours or make more money. To a longshoreman, home life and personal relationships are secondary; the job always comes first. Jim has been a longshoreman for twelve years. He is thirty years old, divorced, and the father of a seven-year-old boy. After his wife kicked him out, he moved back in with his parents. "It's great," he says. His mom makes his breakfast, packs his lunch and/or dinner, and does his laundry. He works every day he can so he doesn't have time to look for a place of his own. "With my job," he admits, "I couldn't take care of a place by myself anyway."

Even though their lifestyle appears to be one of extreme personal sacrifice, these longshoremen don't feel as though they give anything up, or shortchange themselves on life. To them, work is their life. It's not greed that drives these longshoremen—although they certainly make a lot of money, but making money is only a measure of their work, how many hours in a week they have pushed themselves. Trish "the dish," known throughout the terminals as a longshoreman's port in the storm, makes as much money during her breaks as she does for the day's work. One morning when a crew got to work, they found Trish naked, asleep under a crane on the dock. Apparently, she got off work around 3 a.m. and went to a local bar with a few of her male co-workers, then she returned to work for her car but opted to earn some extra money, off the clock, from her fellow longshoremen. She made more than the \$28 an hour the union guarantees. Trish is not a prostitute in the longshoreman's eyes; she's just paid for her favors—like buying your girlfriend a necklace or your wife a washing machine. She doesn't solicit the men—she doesn't have to. They go to her with a proposition and she chooses which offers to accept or decline just like she chooses which jobs she wants to work on the dock.

As for a longshoreman's lifestyle, Jean—a longshoreman's wife for forty years—says, "It's hell!" But, to a longshoreman, not working would be more like hell than the hard hours or strains of the job—personal losses are a consequence of the job, not a sacrifice. The money a longshoreman earns pays for a lifestyle for their families; but a longshoreman's life is on the docks.