

On the mud dock, Phil McCauley secures a cable underneath a gravel drier which is about to be unloaded from a barge.



Tom Vitts eases an empty Sea-Land container onto the trailer on which it'll be hauled to the Sea-Land "pit" and dispatched to some point in Alaska. The container operation allows a ship to be unloaded and loaded simultaneously, helping to cut dock time in half.

The men on the docks

When a ship finally navigates its way up Cook Inlet to Anchorage, a team of some 50 men swings into action, working almost non-stop until the vessel is unloaded and reloaded. The members of the Anchorage Independent Longshore Union are crane operators, forklift drivers, bulldozer drivers, walking bosses and winch drivers, men who work with their hands and machines to get the goods on the dock and the ship on its way.

Container ships and automation have taken a good deal of the romance out of longshore work since World War II. The Port of Anchorage's mechanically impeccable facility at the end of Ocean Dock Road enables longshoremen to unload and reload a ship simultaneously while cutting in half the time it took to unload a loose cargo vessel before containers.

But the role of the longshoreman is still the same. They're extremely conscious of the importance of their jobs. Knowing better than half of the goods entering Alaska are brought on ships and barges, Anchorage longshoremen realize they're a major link in the chain of services which brings goods to the 49th state.

"I think we've all got a lot of pride in our jobs and in doing them right," Tom Vitts explained. He works at a variety of jobs on the dock, but as he was talking he was locking and unlocking Sea-Land containers on trailers pulled under the Port of Anchorage's huge crane by trucks which shuttle the containers between the dock and "the pit," the Sea-Land container storage area.

The crane operator, sitting some 30 feet above the dock in a small cab with windows in the floor, lowers the bridle which grabs the unlocked container. With the flip of a switch the crane lifts the big metal box and



Hatch tender Clifford Brandt watches to be sure the Sea-Land container being lowered onto the Galveston is dropped into the right position in the ship's hatch. Containers ride five deep in the hatch and are stacked three high on deck.

swings it over an open hatch of the S.S. Galveston, then lowers it into the hatch as a pair of longshoremen on the deck of the ship guide the container into its space.

With a container ship like the Galveston at the dock and a couple of barges being unloaded at the other docks closer to town, most of the Anchorage Independent Longshore Union's 28 members are at work. In addition to the 28 regular members, another 20 or so have made the "extra" list. Since the time a ship or barge spends at a dock means money to the vessel's owner, longshoremen often work around the clock to get them unloaded.

"In the transportation business it's either feast or famine," Kowalski lamented. "There are times when everybody's working like hell and the next day nobody's doing anything."

One answer to the sporadic nature of longshore work around the country has been found in a strong union. Anchorage longshoremen gained autonomy from



A load of rolled up fence arrived on one barge which was being unloaded at one of the mud docks last week.

their trusteeship in 1955 and have operated independently since. During the summer-long West Coast dock strike last year they didn't strike.

Hatch tender Clifford Brandt considers the local autonomy a good deal for both sides.

"This way we're sure to get work and give the company a fair shake at the same time," he said.

A few of the men who work the Anchorage docks have been together since the union first got started in 1950, Brandt says.

"Some of us have gotten so that we know what the other guy's doing all the time," he reports.

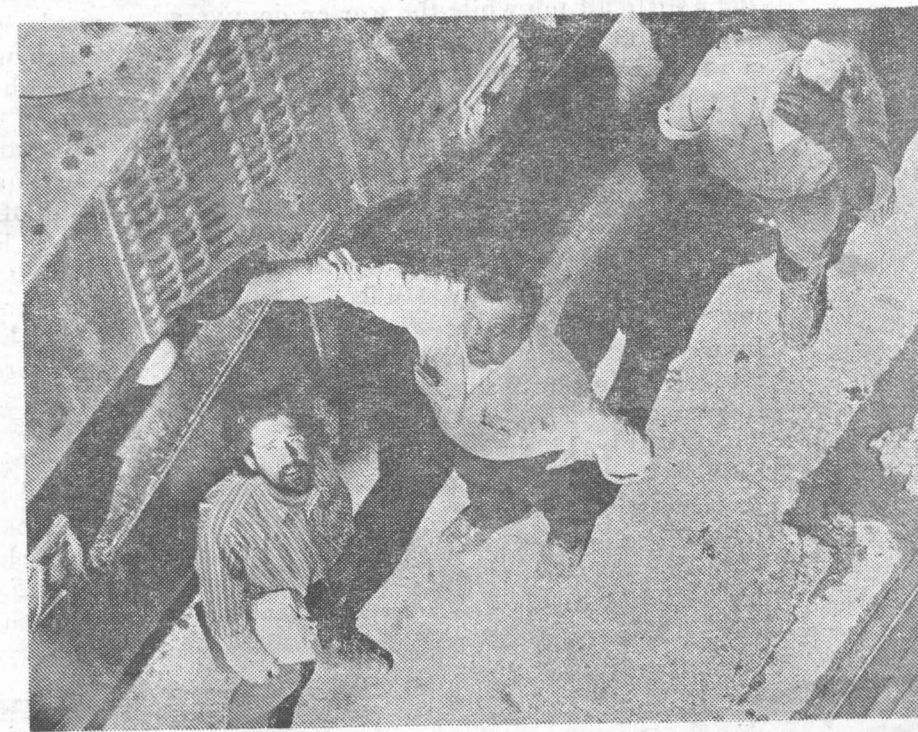
His job is to make sure the containers being loaded on the ship end up in the spot assigned to them. A mistake in the location of a container and an extra hour's work could be involved in correcting the error.

On the Port of Anchorage dock modern equipment installed for container loading and unloading simplifies the men's work. It also cuts down on the number of longshoremen needed to handle a ship.

"When we got automated there was less work, sure," Vitt admits. "But now there's more ships, so we come out about even."

Some of the men prefer unloading the barges which are run into the "mud docks" closer to town. Hauled up Cook Inlet by tug, the barges are tied up at high tide as close to shore as possible. At low tide they're almost high and dry, allowing the longshoremen to unload and reload them with forklifts, winches and bulldozers.

"We work together and cooperate together," Brandt says.



Longshoremen's boss Bud Kowalski explains the operation of the gigantic crane at the Port of Anchorage dock to Alaska Living editor Tyler Jones as photographer Neal Menschel catches a candid shot from atop the crane.

Story by Tyler Jones
Photos by Neal Menschel