

Diana Matthews interviewing Mr. Earl Benner at 238 Phipps St.
Fort Erie. April 17th, 1985.

D.M: Hi Earl, Where were you born?

E.B: Where? Ridgeway. Up near the Cherry Hill Golf Course.

D.M: When did you move to Fort Erie?

E.B: 1940.

D.M: Did you live in Ridgeway before?

E.B: Oh yeah, I lived in Ridgeway and I went to school in Ridgeway.

D.M: Which school?

E.B: I went to the Ridgeway School and the High School and prior to that I was..... I went to No. 10.

D.M: Where's that, Ridgeway?

E.B: Well, it's outside, it's where the stop light where you turn to go into Ridgeway. It's the Battle of Ridgeway they call it, they have a monument there. The Fenian Raid. That was a schoolhouse, the old schoolhouse was there, a red brick schoolhouse. Just a one room. That's right where the battle was fought. The Fenian Raid.

D.M: How old are you now?

E.B: I'm 73 now. I went to school there, I was 7 years old, I guess, 5 or 6 years old.

D.M: What did you do out there when you were a kid?

E.B: Well, my dad had a farm and I helped on the farm. Then he had a gravel pit and a cement block plant and I used to help water the blocks and do the chores around, cut wood. Everything was coal oil lights then and coal oil lanterns. I had to pump water to the cattle, it was all done by hand. Fill the wood box up, it was an old fashioned farm.

D.M: Where was the farm?

E.B: Just about a mile from the Garrison Road, north, on the Ridge Road. On Bertie and Ridge, on the corner.

D.M: Did you go to Crystal Beach Amusement Park when you were a kid?

E.B: Oh yeah! Always had to go with the farmers picnic, that was a big deal there, all the people in the country. They had picnic tables and everybody would take their own horses and wagons and there were a few cars, very few.

D.M: Did you go on any of the rides?

E.B: Oh sure, yeah. We used to ride all day and then when we moved to Ridgeway my dad had a store there, in Ridgeway. I was a little older then and in the spring of the year when the beach first opened,

why, the rails on the rides would be all rusty, see, and you could go up there and ride all day for free to break the cars in. We'd go on this giant coaster, we'd go on it about 14 times, without stopping! We'd keep right on going. Then they'd grease up the tracks and get all the cars lubricated. That was always a big deal, we looked forward to that.

D.M: What about Erie Beach, did you go there?

E.B: I went there in my younger days with the family, on picnics. I'd only be about 6 or 7 years old, 8 years old. They had a very nice zoo there, alot of animals and birds.

D.M: Why did they close it down?

E.B: Oh, I don't know. It went bankrupt I guess. Same as the other one I guess, everybody started getting cars in. At Crystal Beach they had cottages, thousands of them. People would go and rent cottages, but transportation was a big problem.

D.M: How did the people get from Buffalo to the amusement parks?

E.B: Mostly by boat. In those days there was very few cars. That was before they built the Peace Bridge. They had to come across on the ferry, the ones that had cars, they'd drive up. Most of the people from Buffalo would get the streetcar and go down to the boat, the Crystal Beach boat. Prior to that, they had a train that ran from Fort Erie, they'd come across on the ferryboat, one of those old ones, and they'd get on this little train and go to Erie Beach.

D.M: What was the train called?

E.B: Gee, I don't know, it was only a little narrow gage, a small train. Erie something, I don't know.

D.M: Why did you move to Fort Erie, was it because you got married?

E.B: My, mother lived here. I left Ridgeway and I went up north. I worked in the mines up there and I got hurt in the mines so I came back home. I still have an aluminum plate in my foot. They were looking for men at the Fleet at that time and my mother said oh, they're hiring men left and right up there so I went up a couple of days later, I went up there and they said come into work Monday morning.

D.M: What kind of job did you do?

E.B: Well, when I started in there, I started in the plating room, with the cadmium plates and the anadais. I worked there for a while and then in the paint shop, Dopey aircraft, painting, spraypainting. Then at nights I went over to Buffalo, to McKinley Tech. Toolmaking.

After I got my trade apprentice, I quit the paint shop, got a transfer into the tool room and I spent the rest of my days there. I was pensioned about ten years ago.

D.M: I know they tore down the Rose Seaton school this past summer, do you remember when it was still in operation?

E.B: I had the date on that, when they tore it down they had it in the paper, they published the date. The first school built was a frame building, a four room frame building and her [Mrs. Benner] grandfather built that for 995 dollars. That stood for a couple of years then they rebuilt it with brick, then they added to it after that.

D.M: What about the railroads in Fort Erie?

E.B: They've died down, the trucks have taken over, everything's shipped by trucks now. There used to be a weight freight that ran from Brantford to Fort Erie on a daily run, go up in the morning, back at night. They used to carry..... they had a two passenger coaches on there, baggages coaches. They made a daily run, they cut that out, oh, it's been cut out for 40 years I guess. Then the freight started to die down, there's hardly any traffic at all, in fact they're closed. That's the farther one that runs to Ridgeway. Then there's the other route that goes to Toronto, T,H&B, Toronto, Buffalo and Hamilton. Then there's one that goes into Toronto, but the St. Thomas trains, now instead of going the old route, they go through Welland and Niagra Falls and go to St. Thomas. So, the railroad's flat here now, there used to be alot of traffic out of here, everything went by rail and now it's all by big trucks. Yards all over the town here, parking up by the peace bridge and everything.

D.M: You say your father had a business in Ridgeway, what kind?

E.B: He had a grocery store right across the street from the United Church. Then they moved to the farm when I was about 8 or 9 years old I guess. He was there 5 or 6 years then he moved back into town and bought another store, Groceries, Wallpaper and Paints.

D.M: What was it called?

E.B: Benners Groceries, Wallpaper and Paint. Then he sold out there, I went away, Then he started another store, selling washing machines and televisions and refrigerators, that was up by the school. Then he finally got a job, he wound up..... he sold that store and he got a job in charge of the stores for Bertie Township, for the company stores like the supplies, pipe, fencing, posts, whatever, and keep records for that. He was pensioned off from there.

D.M: You mentioned Bertie Township, was that before Fort Erie was grouped together?

E.B: Well, the Bertie Township took in from Sherkston, Stevensville and Fort Erie at one time. Then Fort Erie formed a town, so they broke away from Bertie Township. The town of Fort Erie is formed of Fort Erie south, Amigari and Bridgeburg. This end of the town is Bridgeburg. Before that it was called Victoria, cause there's a railroad yard down the street here about a half a mile and that's what they call Victoria Yard, where the trains came in, and then they sorta joined in..... They built a bridge across the river for the railroad, so they called it Bridgeburg. Then they took away Victoria Yard. But Fort Erie was down the other end and Amigari was over by the racetrack. It was split into 3 little towns so they joined the whole works together, I just forget the date, but it's all Fort Erie now. But they go..... They went as far as a mile or two out of town, that was Fort Erie. Then Bertie Township took over, or Fort Erie took over Bertie Township and everything, Stevensville, and it's all Fort Erie now. It goes right up from Douglastown and along the river and it cuts over along Stevensville and through Sherkston, this side of Sherkston. There's a turn in the road up there on the No. 3 highway, that's right about where the dividing line is, that's from there, down to the river's all Fort Erie.

D.M: Did you ever go to the racetrack?

E.B: Oh yeah. In the last couple of years I haven't been going, but I used to go.

D.M: When did it open?

E.B: Oh boy, it was way before my time! I remember my dad got a wagonload, came down one time and I came with him, I was only 12 years old I guess, and they tore down one of the old stables at the racetrack and he got the lumber, for hauling it away and I was about 12 years old then so it was an old building then, so it must be a hundred years anyway, During the war, they had about 5 test pilots here at the Fleet and this one test pilot, he was a flyer in the first world war, he'd been shot down and he had some scars where he was wounded and he was flying into the Fleet and he was just coming in for a landing, he was quite low, in this here Air Cobra, from Buffalo Airport, he had no business being over but he was on this side of the river somehow and he come in and he swooped low and he crashed into the set of planes and o'h, there was an awful accident, they

were both killed. The parts, oh they went flying for half a mile!
It was horrible! That's one bad accident we had there.

Alot of good hockey players here.

D.M: Yeah, which ones?

E.B: Oh, there's Reid, Tommy Reid and Pierre Pilote and there's Dunns, Ricky, they didn't play pro, but one of the Zimmerman boys played pro and there's Rombough boys, they both played..... the one guy made the big time hockey. And there's McMann, Mike McMann, he played for the Northstars and he played for the New York Rangers. We were up there to a hockey game a couple of months ago and we were looking, they got the pictures up by the arena down there, you've probably seen them on the wall. We've got a good football player here, Tip Logan, he was place kicker for the Hamilton Tiger Cats.

D.M: Did Fort Erie ever have a baseball team or a hockey team?

E.B: Oh yeah! They had some good ball teams here a few years back, the railroad, what do you call it, the Michigan Central, Mentholatum had a big team, they had a good team. The fellow right across the street there, Jeff Hall, his name is up in the hall of fame there, he was a good pitcher. He used to pitch in the states.

The Arena was built in, I forget the year now, but the Buffalo Bisons, they wouldn't build it in Buffalo so they came over here and they built it here, that was the home of the Buffalo Bisons, so that really built up alot of the local teams. They had a damn good team in Ridgeway, it was was a local, Fort Erie, Niagra Falls and Port Colborne, just a local team and some of those players branched out to Buffalo, they were picked up on different farm teams. They've had alot of smaller teams, bantams and like that, alot of championships, in fact we've got 3 teams this year that won cups, yeah, it's a good little hockey town.

D.M: Do you remember when the Peace Bridge was being built?

E.B: Oh yeah. The Prince of Wales came here and dedicated it, I was about 16 or 17 years old and the whole town was out, I guess every man, woman and child! It was a big day.

D.M: Did it change the town much to have a bridge from the states?

E.B: Not really, I don't think so. Because most of the traffic was spread over..... a few travelling on the No. 3 highway going to Detroit or to Crystal Beach, but the town itself, I don't think it..... There was a few people that shopped around a bit, but instead of being

on their way, they'd stop at Ridgeway or Crystal Beach, like butter and eggs, cheese and jam, the things that they always buy when they go back, alot cheaper and alot better. They used to like the Canadian beer, they were allowed a case or something, they'd never go back without having a case of beer and a couple of pounds of Canadian cheese, they liked that. And jam and china, they went for that. They had a heavy duty there, see? It came from England over here, duty free.

D.M: What about Jarvis Street, what was it like then?

E.B: It hasn't changed an awful lot, they spruced the fronts up a little bit, but it's just like any other town.

D.M: Has the kinds of business's changed?

E.B: No, not much, hardware store and an ice cream parlour, restaurant, about the same as it is now. There'd be..... oh, there's video stores now which they never had before and dry cleaners. The hardware store, they went together with the furniture store and they had undertaking on the side, that happens alot in small towns

D.M: When you were dating your wife, what did you do for entertainment, where did you go?

E.B: Swimming! Swimming and dancing!

D.M: Where?

E.B: In the river. She [Mrs. Benner] swam across this river. Alot of the boys swam, not too many of the girls swam across. That's a pretty stiff current. Oh, we used to like to dance out at the Crystal Beach Ballroom. They'd had a ball, and all of the spots going around.

D.M: What kind of dancing did you do?

E.B: Well, in those days it was what they called the Charleston. The Charleston and the Black Bottom, it was in that era, the 20's, 30's, they'd have two big name bands there.

D.M: Which ones?

E.B: Oh, they had all the top bands, Guy Lombardo, Kay Kayser, the Dorsey boys, Tommy Dorsey and his brother. They'd have two bands, one of them would play for a while and then the other one would play. They had a big band on the boat, the Crystal Beach Boat and they danced over and back. Sunday nights they'd have moonlight rides, that was great for the young kids, they'd get a nice moonlit night out there on the water, necking here and there and all over the place! Some of them would be inside dancing. I went across

there alot, I never had any real rough ones, we had a couple, if it was rough, they'd have to roll the canvas down around, the rain would be blowing in and the wind. They were big wide boats.

D.M: Where did you go on the boat, where did it take you?

E.B: Oh, from Buffalo to Crystal Beach. And they'd land at the foot of the main street, and then Sunday night they'd have the moonlight rides, they'd leave Buffalo and they'd come over to Crystal Beach and they'd pick up some passengers there and they'd go for a ride way up in the lake and back, it was a couple of hours I guess, 2 or 3 hours and then they'd come back. Oh, you could buy hotdogs and there was all that stuff.

D.M: How much did they cost at that time?

E.B: Oh, 25 cents or 50 cents or something like that, everything was nickels and dimes, it's quite a difference from today. It was 25 cents to go to the ball game, now if you want a good seat, you've gotta pay ten bucks.

D.M: What happened when the Depression hit, did it affect you very much?

E.B: Oh yeah. Everybody suffered, the businessmen and the people, everything was just..... for something to do we'd walk from Ridgeway, when we were young fellows 17 or 18, we'd walk down to Fort Erie. On a nice moonlit night, just for something to do! We'd go up and around the streets and a couple of girls would be walking along this side and they'd walk back and forth and oh, we used to do alot of walking. Fellows, young guys couldn't afford a car that's all, they just didn't have any, there was only..... some of the better people in the town, some of the richer people had cars and you could count them on one hand! Horse and buggy, all the farmers had horses and buggies, there was a few around town. They started a bus service when I was a young lad, an old model T Ford bus. They ran a bus from Crystal Beach to Buffalo, they'd make about 3 trips a night or day and that was a big deal and oh boy, the guys would save their nickels and dimes and go to Buffalo.

D.M: How much did it cost?

E.B: I don't know, it was 50 cents or something like that, at that time.

D.M: From Ridgeway to Buffalo?

E.B: Yeah! And they just had a little four cylinder bus, a Model T Ford, wouldn't take much gas, gas was only about 5 cents or 10 cents a gallon. They'd take a busload over, we'd go to the show, that was 10 cents.

D.M: Did you go to Buffalo alot?

E.B: Oh yeah, it gave the the kids something to do, a young fellow, you gotta do something. We'd go over to take in a show and have a hotdog.

D.M: Was there no movie theatres in Fort Erie?

E.B: Not then, well they had the old Bellerd down here, came along later, but I don't know just when that was built, it's tore down now, where the Don Deans cars are there, the parking lot. Then later on they built one at the south end and that's closed down now, now there's a drive-in, but I haven't been out there lately. In those days, in Buffalo, they used to have alot of vaudeville, you'd see a picture, and half of the show would be a picture and the other half would be vaudeville. We used to get alot of dancing and singing and acrobats, it's all died out, that stuff, real talent.

D.M: What was your first car like?

E.B: My first car? A Model T Ford!

D.M: Black?

E.B: No, mine was grey! It was a homely looking old grey. My grandfather had it and I got it off of him. When he died it went to the estate and I bought it. I got it for 25 dollars.

D.M: I guess gas was cheap then.

E.B: Oh yeah, that was the first one I had. And we used to buy cigarettes for 10 cents a pack, at one time they were 7 cents. We'd go to Buffalo and every time we'd go to Buffalo we'd bring a carton back, we smoked American cigarettes all the time.

D.M: I guess the exchange between the Canadian money and the American wasn't as it is now.

E.B: Par, you never heard of this exchange at all, everything was par. There was never any..... these finance companies, trust companies, banks handled everything, mortgages and loans, if you wanted anything you went to the bank, it was just a simple interest, now there's compound interest and oh man, these mortgages, they get you up to 20-30 cents. It's terrible, some of these farmers borrowed alot of money, they're all losing their farms, they can't even pay the interest.

During the war, they employed about 3000 at the Fleet, and then alot of people stayed here, made their homes here. I know there's a couple of dozen from west, St. Thomas, London. They moved in here and came down.

D.M: When did the Fleet open?

E.B: I can't remember that either. My uncle laid the first brick in that building when they first built it. That would be in 1934 or something like that.

D.M: Have they always made airplane parts there?

E.B: Yeah, they made airplanes, sonar, radar and component parts for aircraft. They don't make complete planes now, they make component parts, but they make parts for all the big aircraft companies, Consolidated, Boeing, Douglas and anyway they make parts for all of them. For the Boeing they make tail sections and the fin and for Douglas they make flaps and ailerons and the spoilers and the flaps and the rudders stabilizers, the stabilizer is a fixed portion on the tail.

D.M: Did they make parts for planes during the war?

E.B: Oh yeah. They made a complete plane there during the war.

D.M: What kind?

E.B: They made the fighter plane, the trainer, cornell, it was a primary trainer and they made that in the states see? So the factories down there wanted to convert them into fighter planes and bombers and stuff like that so Fleet made all the trainers for the states and for Canada and for Sweden and Britain. They had 5 or 6 test pilots here, the planes were taking off and landing right and left. For the states, they'd bring a bus over and there'd be about 10 girls in there, pilots, and they'd have all the planes lined up in the runway and these girls would take off, one right after another, then they'd all circle around and away they'd go. They ferried all the planes from the factory here to the training bases. Then the R.C.A.F. they'd fly the ones out for Canada and they had a training program on up at.... outside of Barrie or Orillia....Borden, Camp Borden? There was a group came over from Sweden and British and New Zealand and Australian pilots trained up in there on the primary trainers, then they'd go to the secondary fighter plane and they'd end up a fighter pilot.

D.M: How did the war affect Fort Erie ?

E.B: Well, the same as all towns that had a manufacturing there, the thing was just booming, just buzzing.

D.M: Was there ever any danger?

E.B: Danger? No, except that one crash I told you about. But that guy had no business.... I don't know how he got over here, he wasn't supposed to come across the river.

D.M: Where did the planes land, did they land at Fleet?

E.B: Oh yeah. There was a runway right beside the Fleet, right along the..... if you go down the Queen E. highway you can see the runway. They're gonna build helicopters now, this German outfit, Meschenschmidt, they're gonna build a factory right beside the Fleet, but for the time being, why, they're assembling the helicopters there but they have a..... they also build a radar for Raytheon, it's a great big screen, oh, it would be as long as this house, great big..... they go around in a circle, amke them seem like dish and they spin around this way and they rock back and forth as they are swinging. Then they make the big round dishes, they made some of those for Bell Telephone, all the ones you see from here to B.C. A big high tower and you see a big round dish up there, that's a recieving dish. And they come down and there's a transmitter at the bottom that sends it on to the next station.

D.M: Were there always telephones in Fort Erie when you were here?

E.B: Oh yeah. Yeah I can remember when I was on the farm, used to have the old crank styles, so may rings, short and long, they had combinations for each person instead of the numbers like one short and two longs or two longs and two shorts, it was comical! For two or three miles or five miles maybe all the farmers would all be hooked on the same line. People were always listening in on other peoples conversations, you had to be careful what you said!

D.M: Thanks for the interview Earl.

E.B: You're welcome, I wish you could stay a little longer!