

This is Shelley Richer interviewing Mr. Monte Levis, in the Fort Erie Library, on October 18, 1985.

**S.R:** Hello Mr. Levis, and how are you today?

**M.L:** Very well thank you.

**S.R:** What is your date of birth?

**M.L:** Do I have to tell that too?

**S.R:** It helps.

**M.L:** I've got to think... February the 11th, 1906.

**S.R:** Where were you born?

**M.L:** I was born in Manchester, England.

**S.R:** When did you come to Fort Erie?

**M.L:** I came to Fort Erie in the fall of '33.

**S.R:** Did you come straight from England to Fort Erie?

**M.L:** Yes.

**S.R:** What brought you to Fort Erie?

**M.L:** To marry my wife.

**S.R:** Oh, she was English?

**M.L:** No, she was Scottish, originally Scottish. She was visiting her relatives in England, we were introduced to each other and that was it.

**S.R:** What were your impressions of Fort Erie when you moved here?

**M.L:** I came from a big city and I wasn't going to like it. I didn't like the winters, but being stubborn I gave it a try anyway. You read this fiction and stories about "Go West Young Man"... that wasn't actually it. It was that I was going to get married.

**S.R:** What was your trade in Fort Erie, your place of business?

**M.L:** In Fort Erie I went into the business with my inlaws [the Ziff family].

**S.R:** What business was that?

**M.L:** The theatre business.

**S.R:** What theatres did they own?

**M.L:** The Bellard Theatre, that's where we started. They were pioneers and I came to help to do a little more pioneering.

**S.R:** Could you tell me what you know about the Bellard Theatre, when it started, how it started, why it was named the Bellard?

**M.L:** Well, why it was named the Bellard was that they took the first

letter of the first name of the different members of the family.

**S.R:** B is for?

**M.L:** B is for Barney, E is for Etta, L is for Lilian, L is for Louis, A is for Annie, R is for Rosalind, and D is for David.

**S.R:** Did you say Annie?

**M.L:** Annie, yes, that was mother. Yes, I can remember the, my mother-in-law, the old lady, we all dressed her all up... we opened up the Parkway Theatre in August 1940, and she introduced them up at the stage and got a big hand because she knew a lot of these people because, later on she insisted on being the ticket seller at the old Bellard Theatre. She'd go down for an hour or so down at the Bellard Theatre, and that's where she'd meet all the people, all her old chums.

**S.R:** What were the families jobs?

**M.L:** Well, there were different jobs. The boys were going to school, so they'd help out when they could. Barney was the projectionist. When I came I was the projectionist's assistant, I went in the managing and projection, the two. The boys helped out and we did everything ourselves.

**S.R:** Did one of them play the piano?

**M.L:** My wife used to play the piano.

**S.R:** Who was your wife?

**M.L:** Etta, E. It sounds like I'm giving you a biography of myself, the way it is here. I'm sure not that important.

**S.R:** That's the way it was run. That's part of the history of the business and the business was a big thing in Fort Erie.

**M.L:** Like I say, you see, to put all this stuff in, it means that I am taking all this stuff as if I was the instigator of this stuff... no, no. I had a big hand in the Parkway, yes, but not the Bellard. That was already established when I came here.

**S.R:** Do you know when they started the Bellard?

**M.L:** Well, I came in '33 and it was already established a number of years. I couldn't tell you that. Now Mr. Ziff could give you that, or even... who else? No, that's all...Barney should be able to tell you that.. I don't know.

**S.R:** Did they build it or buy it from somebody?

**M.L:** I can recollect, from what my wife would tell me or the family would tell me, it was there. The theatre was started but it was run haphazard. Even some of the old timers would tell me that at times the film would be upside down. It changed hands three or four times and there was this old sea captain or something. You know, it's just stories that they tell me. They'd be playing cards and they'd forget to put the film in, or they'd put it in upside down, but there wasn't that many restrictions on, like there is today. But just... oh, I was going to say something but I forgot, you're a lady. When the family came in, they were seriously minded. It was tough to break in because people weren't going to that place because they knew what they had there. I think when they first came, I'm not sure if it was 25 cents admission, 25 or 30 cents admission. They're going back now. I came in '33 and the talking picture was just coming in. I did see the different systems that was changed. You had to have it synchronized at one time with huge records. The needle had to be dropped. Not when I was... it was before my time... it had to be dropped for the sound of the picture. With the galloping down the lane, that needle would be dropped on then, so you'd get the clip, clip, clip, clop, and so forth, because if you miscued, you'd get pictures of the farm and the cows moving at the sound of the horses running. You know what I mean, but see, that was before my time, and all the theatres were like that, because it was a different type. Then afterwards they brought in where the sound was on the film. The same when colour was first introduced, everything was green until they filtered it out and filtered it out. Then you have it right now, where they have almost perfection, and it's changed entirely now. It's a different system then when I was in the business, to what it is now. Of course all the theatres... it's improved. If you go into Ontario Place, and you're fortunate enough to get into the projection room you'll see something that's entirely different, so different that I wouldn't believe it myself. I'd be lost in there. It's not that I was such a good person as far as mechanisms, and stuff like that, it's not for me. But, I have a projections license too. How I got through, I don't know.

**S.R:** To continue on with your first theatre, what was the Bellard like

when they remodelled it?

**M.L:** Well, they remodelled it. The heating system, I guess, was changed. You see, it was all done before I got here, and the front was changed. I have a fine picture... it's black and white, and I guess I'm the only one that has it... of the front of the old Bellard Theatre.

**S.R:** What was it's seating capacity?

**M.L:** 360, I'm not sure, just approximately, something like that, 360 or 380 I think it was. It was nicely kept, the theatre was nicely kept. As things changed, we introduced new lighting arrangements and... we had a little candy shop on the side there.

**S.R:** Inside or outside?

**M.L:** On the side, an ice cream parlor. You can go in and get your ice cream from the outside, or you can go in from the inside lobby. It was very small, it wasn't big, wasn't very wide, but I think one... two... three, three tables and like a soda fountain at the front. I became a soda jerk. It was really funny. I used to write this home to my family in England and tell them and they used to laugh. We were in the meat packing business in England, and I left a good business, you know, good for the family, for a family business. Nevertheless, I told them what was what. As I say, once I got used to the winters, I didn't mind it. Things weren't good for anybody in those days. When I came here, I think a man would average 15 or 16 dollars a week.

**S.R:** That's not much.

**M.L:** Well, that was it. But you also bought groceries much cheaper, and the rent was much cheaper. The only time I remember something, it was a long time back, I addressed a meeting at the Canadian Legion, and the guest speaker didn't show because he was snowed in or something, and I was there. They said, "Come on, you've got a big mouth and you can talk". "What do you want me to talk about?" So, the topic was, 'Are things better off today than they were?' I thought, well, I believe they are better, people have got what they want. Whether they go in debt for it, I don't know. I'm sure they are with the old plastic cards. Nevertheless, the times are better because... this man was saying that he can't save any

money and he makes five times as much as his father. So, they talked me into it, and they made the announcement and I went up. I got a big hand, you know... anyway, he came out this way and said, "I'll answer all the questions as best as I can." I said, "When I ask you the questions, you tell me, you give me the answer". He said, "Alright". We picked out Mr. So-and-so because he's the one that started it. "How old are you?" He says, "You know how old I am". I says, "I don't, and if you're not going to give me your name and tell me who you are then it's done". So he did, we started out with who he was. He told me, "You haven't got a chance without any money in the bank and your father always had something". Let's call him Mr. Joe. I said, "Mr. Joe, do you have a house?" "Yes." "Is it your own house?" "Oh yes." "Have you got a mortgage?" "Well, who hasn't." I says, "Yeah, I have one too. Did your father have a house?" "Are you kidding, he had two rooms, an apartment." "How many children?" "There was five of us." "Where did you sleep?" "In the kitchen, on the couch, mom and dad slept on one side, and the kids were in the other room." "How many bedrooms have you got?" He said, "Three". "How many children have you got?" "A boy and a girl." "You've got your bedroom and the misses, your daughter's got her bedroom, and your son's got a bedroom. But you, at your father's, you were sleeping and then you had to get up because you had boys and girls and when they got bigger they had to get up". He said, "That's right, so he got three rooms in his apartment." "Did you have air-conditioning?" "Are you kidding?" "See?" "We had air-conditioning alright, you opened the windows." Then I said, "Did you have refrigeration?" "No", he said, "You had to go to the ice-house to get it. In the wintertime we didn't go to the ice-house, we went to the river and got it". "Have you got a refrigerator?" He says, "Sure". "Have you got a deep-freeze in the basement?" He says, "Yeah". It went on like that. "Have you got furniture, have you got a radio?" "Oh yeah". "How many radios did they have? Did your father have a radio?" He says, "There was no radio in those days". "But later on, did he ever have one?" They had crystal sets and all that stuff. I remember them.



He says, "No". "How many have you got now?" "Oh, we've got one in the den..." "You have a den too, did your father have a den?" And so forth, see? There was three or four radios, both kids have got bikes, they had televisions in the bedrooms, one downstairs and one upstairs, and his wife drives a car and she's got a car and he's got a car. "Did your dad have all that?" "Are you kidding, a two wheeled car they had, a bike." I said, "Have you got nice furniture, carpets and stuff?" "He never had that either." "You've got it. Are you living better than your father? You complain you've got no money in the bank, stop paying the payments on the car, stop paying the mortgage, go into three rooms, don't have any carpet sweepers, don't have any carpets, never mind the carpet sweepers, don't have this and don't have that. You would have a fortune in the bank. You figure out how much a month you pay the bank off on your charge account, and stuff like that, see. Your father couldn't borrow any money, they wouldn't give it too him because he's not a good risk. Not that he wasn't a nice person, because they don't know whether he would have a job the next day. Your parents, after all, they probably were the same way. They would remember your grandparents. Are your grandparents alive? They will tell you." When I came out from England, at the time, they didn't want me to come here.

**S.R:** Because of the Depression?

**M.L:** Because of the Depression. We weren't short of anything where we were, but that's when England started the 'Dole', they called it, the unemployment insurance. That's where it originated, in England, not in the States, and not here, it started in England. I was a young fellow, but I remember that distinctly.

**S.R:** Going back to the Bellard again, you mentioned then that the Parkview... was it the Parkview or Parkway?

**M.L:** Parkway.

**S.R:** ...that the Parkway Theatre opened in what year?

**M.L:** August, 1940.

**S.R:** That was the one you, more-or-less, operated?

**M.L:** Yes, but in conjunction with all the family. It was all a family

business, it was never one person. It was always a family business. We opened on August, 1940. All the proceeds were given to charity. I think it was the...

**S.R:** The opening day proceeds?

**M.L:** Yes, the opening night, yes, and we jammed in... all the dignitaries were in there. I know, I wore my tuxedo, and as fast as we got the cleaning... we were a little behind schedule... and as fast as we got the cleaning personnel out, we opened the front door and let the people come in. The Mayor and the Town dignitaries were there. My mother-in-law was the lady introduced on the stage. She was given a big hand. She told them how she started in the business. This is all on paper and it's all written up. That's one thing the editor's of the papers couldn't bypass, because it was a big thing for Fort Erie. We had the nicest small-town theatre in Canada. It was fully air-conditioned and everything.

**S.R:** Did it attract many Americans?

**M.L:** Yes, plenty of them in the summertime, yes, all of the time.

**S.R:** Oh, so that really helped out with business then?

**M.L:** Oh yes, we would sometimes do better business in the summer than we would do when the weather got bad, definitely. Oh yes, they used to come in, it was a hang-out more-or-less. We'd change twice a week, so they would come Mondays and Thursdays. All small towns do that.

**S.R:** The Parkway used to have drives, paper drive, aluminum drive...?

**M.L:** Oh, during the war. We were approached for that, yes, for recycling paper and aluminum. The Canadian Niagara Power Company built this big wood bin for this. I've got those pictures, but I can't find the damn things. In my moving from one place to another, you lose that stuff. I had many pictures of the Parkway, all inside and... oh, it was a beautiful place.

**S.R:** Could you tell me a little bit about the aluminum drive?

**M.L:** Yes, well, it was announced at the schools, and so forth, and in the newspapers, that a big drive for aluminum was on, and that anybody that brought in any kind of aluminum vessel, or something, whatever it was, would be given free admission to the show. You're

not going to get people, old people to do it, it was for children, especially for children. You didn't need any tickets, what you brought was a pan and you threw it in the bin, and you'd go right in there. We had help from the police, and so forth. I've got a picture of that with the big bin in the front and the kids lined up. Then we'd get calls from Mrs. Jones, I'm just calling her Mrs. Jones, a phone call from the mama that she can't find her best aluminum pot. "Jimmy must have taken it to the bin. What are we going to do without it? I can't afford to buy a new one." Well, I says, "Well, you just come right down here and you get all the choice of all we've got up here, before they come and take it away in the truck, and if you can't find yours, take another one". It was the same with paper, bundles of paper stacked right up. What we did do in the Parkway was... we were way ahead of everybody. It was a brainwave from my youngest brother-in-law, David. We brought Santa Claus in in the afternoon a week before Christmas, the Saturday before Christmas. We brought Santa Claus, and the kids were given grab-bags for free when they came in, with candy. They paid their admission, and lots of times we'd give them free, to come to see Santa Claus. We'd fill the whole platform. I've got one chap that come in here... I bought a Santa Claus outfit and put it on him and the kids used to come in to see Santa Claus. Then afterwards we'd loan out that suit to different churches, then finally the churches started their own, then they worked the Santa Claus Parade. We had nothing to do with that, but we started the Santa Claus thing in Fort Erie. Before then they never had it. That probably came about '34 or '35.

**S.R:** Do you remember who your first Santa Claus was?

**M.L:** No.

**S.R:** There was a certain dress code at the Parkway for the matrons, and the theatre girls, and boys, right?

**M.L:** My ushers were dressed like... do you remember the staffs in the hotels? They'd have on a pill-box hat, and the girls had tunics, with brass buttons, and fluted skirts. They looked very sharp in them... very smart. I've still got pictures of the girls.



**S.R:** What about the boys?

**M.L:** We didn't have... I never employed boys.

**S.R:** Oh, just girls?

**M.L:** Only young ladies as usherettes.

**S.R:** The matron, was she dressed the same?

**M.L:** No, the matron would have her uniform, like a white apron, and so forth... but they liked it. It was up to the person herself. It was... generally wore a white apron with a white gown, something like that so that they can be conspicuous in the outfit. They would watch the little girls in the washroom. The one innovation in that theatre which was unusual, it was the first of it's kind in Canada, there was a small toilet for children. Did I mention that? It was the first in Canada, an innovation there, a little toilet this big, and it's there. I'm told these chaps are making it into a recording studio. I don't know whether... they said they were going to keep that there. There was space in the ladies washroom, it was separate. You had a powder-room outside, then you went in the inside where the toilets were and the washbasins. It was very up-to-date and very smart. You had to see it to realize that for a small town, I think we went overboard. It was 15-20 years ahead of the Town, definitely.

**S.R:** How many people did the Parkway hold?

**M.L:** I'm not sure now. I'm not sure whether it was 600 or 800. Don't quote me if I'm not sure.

**S.R:** So, around 600 or 800, something like that?

**M.L:** Between that. I'm not sure exactly. I'll have to find out. I've forgotten. I just can't quite remember. I'm not sure whether it was 600 or 800. I think it was 600, more than likely. I'm not sure.

**S.R:** So, it was quite a bit more than the Bellard?

**M.L:** Well, you couldn't compare the two. It was just like going into, say, a small grocery store then going to the A&P Store. See, that was the difference, definitely. You've got a wide 50 foot building, you've got a screen that's over 40 feet, and when cinemascope came in, we curved it. You had very good sound in there and it

had good lighting, it was quiet. When the boss is there and you're in a show, you don't go for that stuff, you wheel them out, the trouble makers. We showed very good movies. Of course, we couldn't improve on the movies because we got the best we could. If the movie was not good, it wasn't our fault. But, as I say, in that theatre business we did fine until television came in. When television came, all border towns suffered in that, just like that. We kept on, and kept on, and kept on. I went down to the Town and asked them if they could delay property taxes for awhile, so we could carry on until people got tired of this... what they thought was a toy, at first. I never thought it would last. If I had been brave enough I would have gotten out of that a long time ago. I would have gotten out and got into television. Not working in television, but selling television sets, so on and so forth. I mean, you've got to have somebody like that. Even the top people like Famous Players Canadian, and Dominion Sound Equipments, they were people we were in contact with all the time, we were doing business with them.

**S.R:** Famous what?

**M.L:** Famous Players Canadian, that's your top, even today, that's your top, biggest circuit. They pooh-poohed the idea of television. Then your Dominion Sound Equipments, some of their brilliant engineers, they pooh-poohed it. They said it was a toy and it won't last. How wrong they were, see, how wrong they were! We'd have our equipment serviced every so many times a year, under contract, they would come down and check the machines over, by experts... it's like you have a car overhauled. It's a brand new car when it comes, but you should have it checked over all the time. They would come, and I would talk to these engineers, good sound engineers, they've got letters after their names. "What about this television, Joe?" or Tom, or Bill, whoever came in. "Ah, that's a toy, it will never last." But people were so entranced to have it in their own home, they didn't have to go out. They were sitting in front of that boob-tube, as you'd call it, and watch 'Hopalong Cassidy' or 'Uncle Miltie'. It was just plain nothing. See?

**S.R:** Yes, instead of going to the show?

- M.L:** Yes, they bought that thing and paid 800 or 900 dollars for it and they're paying it off. The wages were not too much, even then. They wanted to be comfortable. They'd have some beer in the house, and that, but they may not have a chair to sit on. They'd have the Friday night fights, which were all fake anyway.
- S.R:** There used to be a lot of snow storms and Fort Erie didn't have the equipment to handle the storms, and it used to cause problems at times with the theatres. Please explain the problems with the film and the T.H. & B. train.
- M.L:** Yes. There was so much snow and the equipment was breaking down most of the time, no vehicles were going. We had to take the boxes of film down to the station. Some of the larger ones would weigh about 40-45 pounds. We had two broom poles, we inserted them to the handles on the boxes of film. Mr. Ziff and I, Mr. Barney Ziff and I, were to carry them down to the station. They were advised by the railway express agent, Mr. Prior, that the train was not going to stop. They suggested that while the train was moving slowly, the baggage door would be open, and we could throw them on. It was difficult for me because I'm not big built, or strong either. But with the help of the others, we had managed to get them on.
- S.R:** It also caused problem with the switches. Could you tell me about the phone calls you got at the theatre?
- M.L:** Yes, we used to get... on very, very bad nights, we would get phone calls from the office of the C.N. asking if there was any men, could they be advised if any men wanted to make a few dollars, they could use them for cleaning out the switches. The trains couldn't get through until those switches were cleaned out. We had one or two, there was a very sparce attendance on nights like that. But, those who did go, I spoke to them a few days later and they said that it was absolutely ridiculous because as fast as they cleaned them out, it blew in again.
- S.R:** Something that wasn't mentioned about the Bellard was the free...
- M.L:** Before my time they used to give out dishes. They were good English china too. I still think that there are families in Fort Erie that would still have the odd piece or two, from those giveaways.

**S.R:** How did they get them?

**M.L:** Well, when they came, the lady who would come on certain designated nights, she was given a ticket. She bought an adult ticket, and she was given a ticket which would entitle her to get a dish. Now, a cup would require probably two admissions, a plate, maybe a small tea-plate, maybe one, a large dinner plate were three admissions. Then they would advertise that tonight, if you have your required number of tickets, dish tickets, your plate's here, or your cup's here, so you could go in and get it.

**S.R:** Oh, that was a way of getting people in there more often?

**M.L:** That's it. That was to bring business up, because business was not that good.

**S.R:** That was during the Depression, or before?

**M.L:** Well, before my time, so it had to be during the Depression.

**S.R:** Going on to the businesses in Fort Erie, Fort Erie used to have an Industrial Commission. Could you please explain what it was and what they did?

**M.L:** Well, they once had a so-called Industrial Commission formed, in conjunction with the Town authorities, to see if they could promote plants, business, industries, to come into Fort Erie. Little headway was made and... I used to read about it in the papers myself, and I made comments to people down at the Town hall, occasionally, when I happened to be there, and a few months later I was drafted onto that commission myself. When I attended some of the meetings, I found out... why-they called it an industrial commission, I don't know, because the main topic was tourism. There was no way that we could attract people into Fort Erie. We have nothing to offer tourists. They were attracted to Niagara Falls. It didn't take long before it was dismantled.

**S.R:** So, it never got anything accomplished at all?

**M.L:** No.

**S.R:** With the location of the Queen E., did the Industrial Commission have anything to do with that part of it?

**M.L:** No, there was talk about... see this is something that I would have to refresh my memory, or I couldn't say anything. The newspapers



would give you most of that. They were talking about fast routes coming out of Fort Erie, over the bridge, expediting the inflow of traffic to the cities, larger cities. Of course, most of us business people, retailers... retailer people like hotels, theatres, restaurants, small stores, and so forth, would sooner attract all the people coming across, the tourists coming through, to maybe stop and purchase things in Fort Erie. Looking back and at today, it was a wise move because no way could the Boulevard have accommodated, it can't accommodate all of the trucks, and all the traffic that is coming through. Nobody could vision... if we could have visioned that, there would have been some real buying business, waste space you could say, around the bridge, because that's become enormously... the buying and selling of that stuff, the brokerages and so forth, pay prices ten times the value, but for the brokerages it's worth it.

**S.R:** Could you please describe some of the industry around here like Fleet and Horton Steel?

**M.L:** Yes, I remember when Fleet... well, it started up just before my time. It was very small. I don't know much about the business, but it did help. Horton Steel was working, and... on and off through periods of labour disputes. They're more or less, according to a newspaper article, that they're thinking of moving out. We're very happy to say that they're still here, here to stay and going stronger than ever, and let's hope that they don't go.

**S.R:** Do you recall other businesses here or ones that have left?

**M.L:** Well, I think Markel Electric went out of business here. I'm not sure whether they're still here or not. I think they went out. They used to employ a few people. We never had any major plants. As I say, the two major ones was Horton Steel... the major one was Horton Steel. Then they had small plants, like the Arner Company has gone, but it's been replaced by another pharmaceutical company. The Mentholatum Company, whether they're still here or not, I don't know. They were there at the time, the Mentholatum and the Arner Company. There were little small places, too small, just two or three men, shops and so forth you could say, but nothing



large. I can't remember nothing large, although I said my memory's not that good. But the main one was the Horton Steel, which was a branch of the Chicago Bridge and Iron. That's why they call it the C.B.I. There's very few industries. You can't call them industries, because they didn't... an industry had, say, 50 people, but these have only two or three and it's not enough. At one time I employed four or five people, not, in the theatre business, the concrete block business. I couldn't buy concrete blocks, so we bought a small concrete block business, an old place that's been, more or less, almost demolished and we built it up and we started to make concrete blocks for our own self.

**S.R:** Was that here or in England?

**M.L:** In Fort Erie.

**S.R:** Where was that?

**M.L:** Over at the Pratt & Lambert Paint Company, I think it's still here, the... let me see now... there's a chemical factory on the No. 3 Highway, right by the railroad crossing. Oh, you can't miss it. One side is the restaurant, and the other side is the... I've forgotten what it is, but they have a factory there. Every time you're going to the mall, just look there. It's there.

**S.R:** What was your cement business, where was that?

**M.L:** I kind of forget exactly where it was. The top of Jarvis Street, yeah, it must be the top of Jarvis Street, just below the Pratt & Lambert.

It was funny because we couldn't get the blocks. We were building the Beach Theatre at that time, and we couldn't get... at Crystal Beach Theatre... we needed concrete blocks and we couldn't get them. So, they brought to my brother-in-law's attention that the concrete block factory out here, a small one... I said, "I don't know anything about concrete blocks, do you know anything about it?" He says, "No". I said, "Well, I know twice as much, but it's still nothing". That's... so we did, and then we organized it. We found out, and we advertized for help, and we got some men. We employed about five or six men at the time. People would come to us, builders would come to us, "We've got to have some of these blocks, we've got to have some of these blocks". "I'm not in the block business,

we're building for ourselves. When they come with a story, and you're going to charge them a little bit... the reason that people are not going into the business is because the war was impending at the time and there was restrictions on things. We had a difficult time getting cement, so we made a deal with the boys, the gentlemen, two very nice gentlemen that owned Niagara Coal and Lumber Yard where the marina is now, not the marina, the... where they sell the boats, Nichol's Marine. We... they had difficulties moving their lumber because they had no concrete blocks for foundations and so forth. So, we made a deal with them... it was very nice... they would give us the cement at a reasonable price, and we'd let them have the blocks. We gave them first choice on the blocks that we made because our equipment was old, it was always breaking down. Every other day we'd have to visit the Horton Steel to have these template machines fixed. So, we were making ours, what we wanted, and then we were slowing down because we couldn't get nails, et cetera, and so forth. But there was no difficulty. When people heard there was a concrete block factory in Fort Erie, they were calling us from all over to get these blocks. But, we give the standing order, more or less, we'd have a regular stand there where the blocks were made for Niagara Coal, because they were our suppliers of the cement. It was a very good mutual arrangement.

**S.R:** You mentioned the Crystal Beach Theatre, where was that, in the Town or the Amusement Park?

**M.L:** Well, not in the Amusement Park, no, no. This was on the Ridge Road going down, just a little past the fire station. I imagine the fire station is still there, on the right-hand side, going down. It went well for awhile. Then, of course in the wintertime, there was not too much traffic, so we just run it on the weekends. There was no Sunday at the time. We sold it, and finally after different channels, and different hands, and so forth, and then... an explosion there, and it blew the building up.

**S.R:** When did you build that?

**M.L:** Oh my gosh, I wish I still knew... I can't remember. To tell you the truth, I can't remember.

**S.R:** Did you have any other theatres? That's the Bellard, the Parkway, the Crystal Beach...

**M.L:** Yeah, we had one in London, Ontario. That's still in operation, I understand.

**S.R:** But it's not family owned anymore?

**M.L:** No, that was sold a long time ago.

**S.R:** What about the drive-in?

**M.L:** Yes, we owned it.

**S.R:** Did the Ziffs start the drive-in?

**M.L:** No, we took it over from these people. These people started it. It was a good establishment, to tell you the truth, and then we were going to build one of our own closer to town. It was right by this chemical factory. In fact, we sold a piece of the property so they could get into their back. So, it's on that street there. Then they came to us with a proposition, so they took it off our hands. Then I run it 'til we closed it.

**S.R:** Until it closed, or until it was sold?

**M.L:** We sold it. We sold it to a company... I tell you, these companies that buy these things are totally different corporations. You don't know, actually, who you are selling it to, but why worry, as long as you're getting...

**S.R:** So it wasn't a private family?

**M.L:** Oh no, a big organization that would have about 20 or 30 of these drive-ins. The Mustang Organization, they bought it and then it changed hands two or three times. Astro Films took it over... Astro something, I'm not sure... I couldn't quote it, because I don't think it's them. It's so hard to... it was sold and somebody else handled it, then somebody else handled it, and when I'd go up there to see... they wanted me to stay with them, and I said, "Well no". I said, "I think... it's not the salary you offer me, that's fair enough, but, the reason I'm selling it, is that I want to get out of it, and my wife wants me out. It's just too much to do. She said that, if I don't sell it then she was going to leave me". They made a good offer so we took it. But it changed hands a number of times. The same people have been running it now, I would say, for the past

7 or 8 years. I would say... sold it about 15 years ago. If I were to look through my records, which I don't intend to do, they're in the attic of the house... but that was the drive-in. The drive-in is still going, and the Odeon Theatre in London is still going. They've been taken over by the big, old English, Odeon Circuit. I think it's still going on today. It's a very nice, very nice, modern theatre. The gentleman that built it found that he had difficulty handling it. He was not used to a city. He had a place in a small town just outside of London. We heard about it and we went to see him, and we bought it. It was a tough time because you were playing second and third run, in film, second and third. That means that you have to wait until most of the downtown and the larger houses have played it. That was a very good dish house too. They give dishes out there, even in my time. They give dishes, and they even gave silverware. It paid off. It got to the point that they were selling too much of this, so we sold it. We were running the Parkway, Bellard, then the drive-in. Then we sold the Bellard... that was the theatre of course, we closed it. I think they made a Y.M.C.A. out of it.

**S.R:** You owned it when it was the Y.M.C.A.?

**M.L:** No, we sold it.

**S.R:** Oh, you sold the theatre, you sold it when it was still a theatre?

**M.L:** Yes, as a building, a theatre building, to the Y.M.C.A. The Town took it, you see, the Town runs the Y.M.C.A., to help them out. It was sold, then after that Don Dean bought it and they demolished it, for parking space, I suppose, and the Beach Theatre was blown up, so there's two gone. The drive-in theatre... the Parkway building stands. It was converted into a bowling alley. Then the Parkway Theatre still stands. It's now being converted into a recording studio.

**S.R:** Oh, the Parkway on the Boulevard is going to be a recording studio?

**M.L:** They're going to make that a recording studio, I understand. What specialty, I'm not sure, but an enormous amount of money is being spent in there... There are extensive renovations. They've ripped the inside up too. That's a shame... all that stuff that cost us an arm and a leg. I guess they have to have some special soundproofing.



All we were concerned with was acoustics, at the time it was very good acoustics. But, that's going to be some kind of recording studio. That's a big thriving business if you have the right people. It has all the different cubicles, or offices, where they do the taping, et cetera. That's my understanding, because I don't know it too well. So, that and the drive-in...

**S.R:** Could you tell me what you know about smuggling?

**M.L:** I know very little about it. It's all hearsay. At one time during Prohibition, truckloads of liquor would come down from the large cities, like Toronto and Montreal, came down the highways towards Fort Erie. There was boats at the dock being loaded up with cases of whiskey, et cetera, bound for Cuba. The bill-of-lading, et cetera, was all made up and the boats would go, then the next day they were back again... all the way to Cuba and back. I think the Canadian authorities must have known... it's not their business. then I hear the stories about how the U.S. Coast Guard used to catch, what they call rumrunners, catch these people and chase these people and they dumped the stuff overboard. The Customs had difficulty in catching these boats, high powered boats, so the Customs got high powered boats, then the rumrunners just got some that would go faster. This is all stories, because it was before my time. But as far as my day, on the bridges it is still going on today, it's still going on today. This history of the Peace Bridge, I mean, if you've lived here for some time you've seen the changes all the time, the improvements that were made there. During the war here there was restrictions on taking foreign currency out of Canada.

**S.R:** Oh, I never knew that.

**M.L:** Yes, a lot of people... if you didn't live in Fort Erie you didn't go across, you didn't go out of the country, there was no problem. But, there was restrictions as to taking... at one time I think you couldn't take anything out. Then you were allowed to take about 4 to 5 dollars, Canadian, take out, unless you had special permits. When you were crossing the border, and I've had that experience, crossing the border you were searched, you were asked to empty



your pockets, show identification, and if you were found with any money, and you didn't have a permit for it, then you were subject to a fine and you would have to pay it in court. The money that you had would be confiscated. It happened to me. I was very embarrassed because I was going over to Buffalo to buy something special, and I had just taken a couple of rolls... I had asked one of my cashiers to save me some pennies, and I had taken four rolls of pennies, and that amounted to 2 dollars U.S. Not thinking, I just had my... you had to have special identification... I'm not sure if at that time you had to have your picture on it. I know you had to have a thumb print and a card, to show to cross the border. They were very strict. I was asked to leave my car, which I understand was totally searched by the Mounties. There was this Mounted Police from Ottawa, and he was interrogating me, "How much money have you got? Empty your pockets. Why are you going there?" and so forth. He saw the pennies that I had and it was ridiculous. I had some loose silver. I had taken the money out of my pocket knowing well that if I got stuck I could call up people in Buffalo and I could get what I wanted. Well, he saw this marked U.S.A., and he started to harass me as to why I hadn't declared it. I said, "It's only two dollars in pennies". If you were to go to the bank, and you had a store, and you asked for 10 dollars in pennies, change, I would safely say that 60 percent would be U.S. It was the same with silver, nobody sorted it, the bank didn't give you any premium on it, and you didn't pay any premium on it, you just... because there was no... the only difference in the rate then... I think, if my mind is clear now, you gave your American people 10 cents on the dollar. If you didn't you could be fined because that was the government deal. The government wanted to get as much U.S. currency... my understanding, I could be wrong... in my understanding it was that the government wanted to get as much U.S. currency, so the Canadian rate was set at 10 cents below the American dollar. Now, when they come into the theatre and bought two tickets, and they gave you a dollar, they're actually giving you a \$1.20. Then, when we had that... naturally we would get a lot of American business in the summer, and we

would take, my cashiers would make a deposit and it would show X number of dollars in U.S., and we were given that 10 cents back, the same with motels and restaurants, any kind of business... to keep U.S. funds right here. If you gave it out, then you got it back. You didn't lose anything. When... then 10 percent was attracting the U.S. people here, and that was it. There was something else that helped Fort Erie, especially the South End, for business, there was restrictions on travel. You could not use your car for pleasure driving coming out of the United States into Canada, which is also unknown to a lot of people. We could go, but the United States people were not allowed to drive their cars, to pleasure drive. Now, a person living in the city in Buffalo, working in a factory, coming over here, was not coming on business. He could work in an automobile factory, whatever it is that you have people working at, pertaining to his livelihood, and to the war effort... can't pretend he's coming over... So, we have a Racetrack, and people coming to the races, so they'd come on the boat. The ferry used to go back and forth. Then the ferry stopped taking cars because they used up too much room. So, the majority of the passengers coming, they would leave their cars on the other side, get on the ferryboat, come off the ferryboat at the Fort Erie dock, which was right across from the Parkway, where Agrette's Store is now, or was, I should say, and then they would... there would be... all the taxis and all the old scrambling things that you could possibly think of, were waiting to pick up these passengers. It cost 25 cents or 50 cents, and they would take you up to the Racetrack, instead of walking up the hill. Private individuals were doing that. The taxis couldn't handle it. When you put 5... the taxis were only supposed to have 4 or 5 people and when you start putting 6 people in it, or 7 people... We even had farmers big flat trucks, horse driven trucks with trestles, and people sitting on that, and it didn't matter. It was fantastic. It was like something that you'd see in the comic movies. Coming back... so you've had them coming over from about 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning... the races started at 1:30, something like that, so they would be... the ferry boat would be jammed coming over

and then when the races would be over, they'd wait for the end of the races, and they were all coming out at the same time. You'd have 6,000 or 7,000 people coming back to the Fort Erie dock to get back, impossible. So, all the hotels filled up, the eating establishments... Mr. Sullivan was opened there, the fish and chip place at the other end of town. They had to have a policeman there because they would raid his doors down to get in. They couldn't put them in. It's only a small establishment. We had no trouble filling ours because, they looked up at the marquee and it said air-conditioned, and it was as hot as the dickens out at the track, and it was hot coming down, and a lot of people couldn't get a conveyance and they had to walk down. It was like New York City on New Year's Eve, around that area. There were all these people trying to get onto the ferryboat. The ferryboat would only take a certain number. Let's say... I don't know how many... but I'd say about 400. Now, you've got 3,000 or 4,000 people, figure it out. It takes the ferryboat at least, even at full speed, they've got to get them off, get it back again, and it takes time coming from the States through Customs. Customs won't take them all. They've got to get off the boat, they've got to line up, and then they've got to go through Customs, and vice versa on the other side. It takes time, so figure a half hour, a half hour each way. So, let's say, at top capacity, 800 in a hour. You've got 3,000 or 4,000 people and they won't get home until 10 o'clock, so they want to have some dinner here, or whatever they want. The hotels were just packed, of course, all of them on there, all the way up, they were just packed to their doors. All the hotels were there. There was two at the North End, on the Boulevard, and when you came up you had the Erie Lane, and you had the King Edward, and the Anglo, they were all there. Yes, they were all there. The restaurants were not too big, and could you imagine Fort Erie handling all of those people. Well, I'll tell you, people... some of the ambitious young men that were working at Fleet full time, on the night shifts, nothing to do during the day, they'd have their cars... even though gasoline was rationed... they'd have their cars and they'd pile in eight people at a time, and get 25 cents

a piece, or 50 cents a piece, to go there and back. How long did it take them to go up to the Track and back? drop them off at the closest point and come back, that's it, back and forth, back and forth. I can remember loading my car for a short time. A friend of mine says, "Come on, give me that car, I'm going to make a few extra dollars", so I lent him my car. He put the gas in it, and he used my big Nash car. I had a Nash Ambassador at the time. It was roomy, it wasn't a good car but it was roomy. I had problems with it. It was roomy and you could take them in up and down, put gasoline in and that was it. So, one of those restrictions had... and believe me, you'd be surprised. People don't realize what actually happened. If you want to go across to Buffalo to buy something special, well, you know it's an infringement, but you're going to take the chance, "No, they won't bother you", but oh yes they will. They had a ladies Customs Officer's special room, and if... the Town's people used to say the Blitz. This is very interesting, that at certain times you would be going across to Buffalo, crossing the border, and you were asked to leave your car and go into this special office there, and you were interrogated, and then you were searched. Well, they found money at the funniest places, the most awkward places, and their names published in the newspapers... Mrs. So-And-So was found and she had 30 dollars which she did not declare and she had no permit for it. As for myself, like I say, I got embarrassed that one time, but that was so funny, it's as if... today you would call it a vignette of a comic opera. I go in there and this man harasses me because I had 2 dollars worth of American pennies. I'm walking out and I saw something green on the floor... the office was packed, it's not a big place like this, just a small section of this here. There was a Customs Officer there, and a Mounted Policeman, and this interrogator from Ottawa, whoever he was, from the Foreign Exchange Control Board. I see this thing on the floor and I picked it up and it turned out to be an American 5 dollar bill. So, I say to everybody, "Does anybody belong to this?" There was no answer so I put it in my pocket and walked out with 5 dollars and 20 cents, and nobody... 7 dollars, instead of 5, and



nobody bothered me. But, I remember that same afternoon I made a deposit down at the Royal Bank, and I spoke to my neighbour, who was manager at the bank at the time, Mr. Stan McKenzie, and he said, "Monte, I don't know why you should have this, why don't you apply for a permit? You have to go over to Buffalo to buy certain requirements from the theatrical people over there?" I said, "Yes I do, there are certain screenings we have to attend to to see forthcoming pictures, et cetera, and so forth". "You do business, let's put it that way?" I said, "Yes". He said, "Well, you would be allowed a permit. How much would you like?" I said, "What am I allowed?" He said, "Well, we'll give you... you don't need too much, do you?" I said, "No". So, he said, "Well, have 25 dollars of each, 25 Canadian and 25 American". I says, "That's fine". I had been doing all of my shopping in Fort Erie. Well, I walked in there one time, and I didn't know... yes I did, because things travel faster through the grape-vine. They were travelling faster then, than you can get the mail sent, from one part of our town to the other, today... faster. If somebody had gone over there, before you knew it he'd make a phone call and call up his friend and say, "If you come over today to Buffalo, don't bring any stuff with you because the Blitz is on". See? And then I hear it. I go to the bank and make a deposit and say, "Hey, don't go to Buffalo today, the Blitz is on". It went all around the Town like wildfire.

**S.R:** What did the 'Blitz' mean?

**M.L:** The 'Blitz' meant that they were stopping you at the border, everybody, or every other car, whatever they wanted. Well, so I had already had my permit in my pocket, and identification. I had a little wallet like I have now and I had identification in there, and so forth. I had some private stuff in my pocket, like a lady carries a purse, we carry it in our pocket. I went in the office and one of the Mounties said, "Hi-ya Monte, are you going to play golf on Sunday?" I played golf with this man. I said, "Yes". He says, "You've got to go in there". And I said to him... I knew that gentleman very well... I said, "Joe", I said, "If you rip that car apart, you'd better put it in a good spot... as you're going off to get your car to go". He started



laughing and he said, "You know you're going in the office?" They said, "Empty your pockets". That's the first thing, "Empty your pockets". I had already told them that I didn't have anything. Customs asked me if I had any American or Canadian money and I said, "Yes I have it", and walked in. You get in there and the officer said, "Empty your pockets". So, I emptied my pockets and I said, "I've got about 20 dollars American and about the same equivalent in Canadian". And they started giving me the business again. They looked through my private papers, and so forth, and gave them back to me. He said, "Now, where did you get this money? What's your business? Whose... and so forth and so on?" So, I told him, "Alright", and I told him plainly, "That's not...". He says, "Well, we're going to confiscate this, you're allowed 5 dollars, or whatever". I said, "Just wait a minute sir", I said, "I have a permit to carry this money". I don't have to tell you, you know what the answer was. "Why didn't you tell us?" And I give him it right back, I said, "Why didn't you ask? You were too busy looking at my private papers. You have no right to look at that. If you're looking for money, that's it". Maybe they were looking for bombs, I don't know what they were looking for, but it wasn't that bulky. Nevertheless, I told them, I said, "Well", I says, "In the first place..." "Where did you get it?" "From the bank." "Then they're going to seize it." I said, "Well, in that case you have to bring in the banks, the Bank of Commerce, the Royal Bank. They give it to me. They give me that money, I've got a permit to carry it, so they gave me that money... permit. Oh yeah". "Why didn't you tell me?" "You didn't ask me." They give me back my money, they give me back this, and I went out. Before I was released they gave me a slip... then it was okay. That was the... but they found, they found the ladies were carrying money between their legs. But, this Customs' Officer lady, Customs' Officer, she wasn't well liked in town.

**S.R:** She had to check everywhere, did she?

**M.L:** Yes. Then of course, it was published in the local paper, you see, in the Niagara Falls paper and the local paper... Mrs. So-And-So was caught trying to take X number of dollars across. I told the

men there and then... I'm a very mild person, but I told the party there and then, "That it was ridiculous because most people living on the border here, that have been here for a time... I haven't been here too long... but some people were born here. They have relatives, they have very good friends, they have people living in Buffalo and the surrounding territory. If they need money, they don't have to take it from here, they take it... they go with just the allowance they've got, and just enough gasoline to get across the border, and if they have something that they want to buy, their friends will loan them the money and then when they come back to visit in Fort Erie, they will give it to them then. So, it was easy, so why...", of course they were after big stuff... but why-to take the Town's people and put them through all that seemed ridiculous to most people in Fort Erie. I told them myself, I said, "I don't need money, I can get credit from the people I'm going to buy from, and if I'm short of funds I can phone any of the places I'm doing business with... any of the film companies would give it to me, even if I'm not doing business with them. If I told them who I am and explained that I run short of cash, can I borrow 50 dollars? I would get it no trouble. I'd put the rest through the mail and send it back to them". However, it didn't come to that. I explained it to these people but they just looked at me and nothing was said.

**S.R:** Was that during the war?

**M.L:** Yes. There was a wartime price, and there was a wartime price board too, that the government set a certain price on certain commodities and you couldn't charge any more for them. They weren't supposed to charge more, but there was a black-market in trading. There was gasoline coupons too, which were black-marketed, gasoline coupons also.

**S.R:** So, the coupons were worth so much, and if you wanted to pay a little bit extra for them somebody would sell you theirs too.

**M.L:** The local garage man that had the pumps would sell them to you for a little extra, for 10 or 15 cents a gallon more for gas. How they did it, I don't know. I didn't need it because I was given a little extra. After all, you need entertainment for the people who

are working here. They built a big hostel out back of the Catholic School to bring in young ladies from Quebec to work at Fleet Aircraft. They brought a lot of women down there. We were talked into... we didn't run in the afternoons because there was not enough business, but we had a nightshift. We run special shows once a week in the afternoons, on a wednesday afternoon. The same film we were playing during the week, for the nightshift workers, so they would have somewhere to go. All the blocks up at the border, you can't... it made it difficult for you to cross, especially these French-Canadians, they probably had difficulty crossing at the border. So, we were asked if we would open up, by the Fleet people, and we did. We never made any money because we didn't do that much business, but it was good public relations. If you're dealing with the public, no matter what it is, you've got to try to do it. Especially in a small town, you've got to try to do it, and it paid off to give the public the pictures. Not that the public reciprocated like you think they would, they would not, they never did. You can't get people to do that. When they're used to going across to the city, the big city, and the gasoline is cheaper, and the cigarettes are 50 percent cheaper, and this is cheaper, they're going to go there, so they'll go to the movie house there. What they save here, they'll pay a little extra on that side. Also, why wait two weeks for it to come by here when you can spend a day there. All border towns are like that. That's why the U.S. cities grow faster.

**S.R:** You have a story you'd like to add, talking about crime in Fort Erie.

**M.L:** Well, there hasn't been too much break-ins, and so forth... I used to experience that. They used to break into the drive-in theatre every so often. They're still doing it. Now, I went to play golf the other day at Rio Vista here, and they told me that they broke in there the other night. They're youngsters and they're going after beer now, but in my place they were going after cigarettes, and so forth. But, they would get in there, and a lot of other establishments, but it's not that bad. You're going to get that when you've got teenagers, even people coming in that have no where to go and

have nothing to do, and the nearest places to break-in, but you had an efficient Police Force then. Today it is a different set-up because it's all done through the Region. People in the Town don't like it, I don't like it. You got fast... of course it wasn't as big, it wasn't spread out as much, because Bertie Township had their own Police Force, and Crystal Beach had their own Police Force, Fort Erie had it's own Police Force, but now it has to go through channels. Sometimes it's very annoying when you have something... then it took five minutes and now it could take half an hour. That's a known fact, that's a known fact.

**S.R:** There was something about a murder?

**M.L:** Yes, there was a young man who was... I don't know whether he picked up a passenger or something, I'm not sure, but he was a taxi driver, and then they found him dead in his cab, killed, shot I think, and his money stolen off of him.

**S.R:** Did they ever find out who did it?

**M.L:** I don't know. I can't recollect that part.

**S.R:** Do you know where it happened?

**M.L:** One of the streets going down to the Racetrack, around that area coming down...

**S.R:** Oh, around Gilmore, around there?

**M.L:** Yes, coming down that way. It was all in the newspaper. You could go back to that. That was probably during the war. I'm not sure if it was during the war years also. That's the only time I can remember, but there's lots of break-ins all over. You're going to have that no matter where you go, even in a village you're going to have that, you know, like, they call him the town drunk, et cetera. But teenagers, and so forth, and that... but... the Town itself, it's progressing slowly. A lot depends on management at City Hall, and it seems to me that there is so many different divisions now... this has to have that, four secretaries, and this one has to have this and this, and that and that. It's just like in the tax office, because it's separating Bertie Township, now look how many there is down in the tax office. Have you ever been down to pay your taxes down there? Look at all the people down there, working there. I'm not saying that



they shouldn't have them, but we have to pay for them. Then there's this controversy... it's being brought up at the elections again, now, why—we have to pay 74 dollars a quarter for water, and you're complaining you're paying rent too much. Not if that person that owns that building that you're in is paying 74 dollars for you. And then you have this... if you have a family and a pool, it's nice. You should have a swimming pool if you can afford to have one. You have children and you have your home and you use a lot of water. The youngsters, you have to clean them, and you have to have a washing machine, you can't keep going to the laundrymat all the time, so you'd use a lot of water. That's alright, so you'd pay more than what the average person would. Take two senior citizens, husband and wife, how much water are they going to use? They have a small home, they don't like to give up their garden... and I don't blame them, I keep mine too, now... they don't use much water, two people. They have to pay the same amount. Now, I'll give you my instance. I'm a bachelor, unfortunately, I go away at times, I go back home to England, so I'm away a month, I go to Florida, maybe for a month, I'm by myself... how much water am I going to use. The only water I'm going to use is watering the lawn, sometimes there's restrictions for doing that, and washing my car, when I feel like it, which is very seldom because I generally take it to the carwash. Nevertheless, I have to pay 74 dollars, and my neighbours down the street with 4 children, and a swimming pool, pay the same 74 dollars. I'm not saying that he's not paying enough, far be it, we're paying too much, and so is he paying too much compared to what other people are paying in different areas of the Region. Niagara Falls doesn't pay that, probably half of it.

**S.R:** Thank you very much for the interview Mr. Levis.

**M.L:** I hope it helped.

**S.R:** Oh, I'm sure it did, thank you.