

Diana Matthews interviewing Mr. Al Reid at his home at 95 Bertie Street,
Fort Erie , May 22nd, 1985.

D.M: Hello Mr. Reid, how are you today?

A.R: Still able to be here, I'm feeling fine!

D.M: Good. How long have you lived in Fort Erie ?

A.R: I was born in Fort Erie , this is my 70th year.

D.M: Where were you born?

A.R: I was born in a home on Niagara Blvd in 1915. October the 12th
1915.

D.M: What types of things did you do in Fort Erie when you were a kid,
what did you do for fun?

A.R: For fun I swam in the river, I played games, went to Erie Beach
mostly in the summertime and I worked a t Erie Beach before my
teens.

D.M: How old were you when you got your job at Erie Beach?

A.R: I'd say I started about 11, and I worked 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 years
of age.

D.M: What type of job did you have?

A.R: Well, I would start out in the morning and I'd peddle the papers from
Buffalo up the Lakeshore and then I'd get done my route and I would
journey into Erie Beach and I would work in the bowling alley, I
was setting pins. I mostly set 10 pins in those days, which I enjoyed
very much, and I got remuneration for it and during the Depression
it came in handy.

D.M: How much did you get paid?

A.R: In those days, we made 5 cents a line. You set the pins, there was
no automatic machines in those days, it was all done by hand, and
for 10 frames you got 5 cents, which wasn't very much, but in those
days it went quite a ways.

D.M: Did you work all day long?

A.R: Well, after my paper route in the summertime, I'd work from maybe
5 in the afternoon 'til 11 at night. That was the closing hour at the
Beach, and then we'd get the train home and get off at my home
in Harmony Camp.

D.M: Can you describe the Park to me as it was then?

A.R: Well, you can't compare the Park today, I will tell you that. The
Park in my day took up a big area. I would say it was pretty near

a mile square around and it was a beautiful park and in those days Crystal Beach was nothing. Everything was at Erie Beach. They had hundreds of rides and games and stands for people to eat in. It was really a sight to see and it was a beautiful park.

D.M: Can you describe some of the rides to me?

A.R: Well, I know there was the Wildcat, which was the biggest ride, it compared with the Cyclone in Crystal Beach, the big ride in Crystal Beach now, and at that time, it was the biggest ride. It had Merry-go-rounds, it had pony rides, The Old Mill Schute...

D.M: What was that?

A.R: The Old Mill Schute was a water ride, you travelled through on boat and at the end of your trip you went up a conveyer belt, away up in the air, and then you came down in the water. It was very interesting, it used to pack the people in when they wanted to ride on it.

D.M: What was the Blue Streak?

A.R: The Blue Streak was another roller coaster, but it couldn't compare to the Wildcat. It was for people that didn't want the sharp bends and real height. The Wildcat was twice as high. In those days it was a real thriller.

D.M: What about the rides that were on the water side of the walkway, there was an airplane one and a slide?

A.R: Yes, there was the Helter-Skelter, which was a ride, you walked up on the inside on steps and when you got to the top, on the outside of the building, it was a slide, and you sat on a carpet and came down on the outside of the building. It was a thriller too. Beside it, there was a big set of swings that went out over the water. In the early days of Erie Beach, there was an open air picture... movies. In those days we had no sound, you had to read everything on the screen, it showed the picture, then you had to read everything below it. Many a night I would walk to Erie Beach or ride on the train to Erie Beach and watch those pictures.

D.M: Was there games of chance?

A.R: There was no gambling allowed, but there were games of chance, you got prizes. There was Bingo, there was penny games, there was ring-toss, the bottle game, fishponds and other numerous games. There was plenty of them, it was a real sight to see.

D.M: Can you describe the Dance Hall to me as it was then?

A.R: The Dance Hall in those days... the main Dance Hall was a three tiered building. On the lower floor there was bowling alleys, washrooms for the swimmers and restrooms and a pool room. The second floor was the main dance floor and on the third floor there was a balcony. People used to sit up there and look down on the dancers below. At that time, that was the Dance Hall of the North American continent. They used to come from all over the world and have contests there, and dance there. They used to bring all the name bands in from all over the world to play at Erie Beach. Now in later years, they built an outdoor dance floor and the people used to dance on the cement floor, but it was all open air. They used to dance out there by the thousands at night time.

D.M: How were things lit, was there electricity through the park?

A.R: In the later years of the park, it was lit by electricity, and along the main walk, which was called the ... well, it compared to a boardwalk, but it was a cement walk, and there were pillars that ran the whole length of the beach at the waterfront and it was lit every night by light standards. There was a light on every cement abutment along that walkway.

D.M: What about the swimming pools, how many of them were there altogether?

A.R: There was the large swimming pool for the real professional swimmers. Beside it was for the beginners and for younger children, that was on the west side of the Dance Hall, on the east side there was a wading pool for little children from babies up. The parents used to take their children there and let them wade in the wading pool. Now that enclosure, the Dance Hall and the swimming pool, was one of the main events of the North American continent. They used to bring the best swimmers from all over the world in for contests and diving. There was a balcony at the west side of the Dance Hall, people used to go up there and watch all the swimmers from that area.

D.M: I understand there was an athletic track in the park too, what kind of things went on there?

A.R: The athletic park at Erie Beach consisted of three stands. There was two on the west side of the track and it extended and ran to the south end of the track, and it also was one of the best on the North American continent at that time. They used to change the circus's in there, practically every two weeks they'd bring a different

show in there, sometimes they would have sitting pole contests, they would have diving contests, they would have soccer games, they would have athletics-that's the runners, they'd bring elephant shows in there, they'd have circuses and it was real attended. You must remember that Erie Beach in that area, 40,000 on big picnic days would come in to that park, and this was before the Peace Bridge was built, and they all had to be transported there by the two trains running from the ferry dock in the South end of town, to the beach, and there was two boats that came from the harbour across to the Erie Beach dock. They transported all those people in those days.

D.M: Was there a zoo in the park?

A.R: There was a large zoo in the park, there was a large enclosure where all the birds were screened in and then on the other side of them there were cages where they had bears and tigers and wolves and all the other main animals of the day.

D.M: Do you remember how much it cost to buy things at the park then?

A.R: During the time of the park, the rides used to run a nickel, 10 cents or 15 cents. As I said before, it was Depression days and you could get alot for your money in those days.

D.M: I heard that you had to buy tickets for everything, like you would buy a roll of tickets and then pay for the rides and things to eat with tickets.

A.R: That's right. In those days, there was no money involved at the rides. Everything was handled by tickets, there was ticket booths set up all over the park. There might have been 20 to 25 ticket booths in that park in those days.

D.M: Did you ever meet the owners of the park, Mr. and Mrs. Bardol?

A.R: I knew what Mr. and Mrs. Bardol and the 3 sons looked like, but personally, I didn't know them. The 3 boys didwork in the park and they used to travel by their special car in those days through the park and that was the only vehicle outside of trucks and the transportation of goods that was allowed in the park.

D.M: Why do you think the park closed, was it due to the Depression?

A.R: The park closed because of the Depression because the original owners, Mr. and Mrs. Bardol and the sons, they decided to sell out and it was taken over by a Mr. Pardee. During the Depression, at that time, there was many people committing suicide, and he was the owner of the beach at the time, and he did commit suicide. The beach closed right after that.

D.M: What happened to the things in the park after it closed?

A.R: After the park closed, all the rides... alot of the rides went to Crystal Beach and then they were sold outright to other parks.

D.M: You lived in Fort Erie through the Depression, is that right?

A.R: I lived in Fort Erie through all the Depression days.

D.M: How did that affect the town?

A.R: Well, during Depression in Fort Erie in those days, if you weren't a customs man or an immigration man or a railroad man or at Horton Steel, it was pretty hard to get a job in Fort Erie. In fact, it wasn't only Fort Erie , it was all other towns besides because the Depression was bad and there wasn't many people working in those days.

D.M: Did you work?

A.R: I worked at Erie Beach, that was the only time or place I worked as a growing up youth.

D.M: What was your next job after your job at Erie Beach ?

A.R: After Erie Beach closed, I caddied at Erie Downs Golf and Country Club, but we didn't make very much money there and we used to spend all day at the golf course. From there I got a job at the Markel Electric and I worked there for numerous years. I worked at Horton Steel and eventually I got into Fleet Manufacturing where I worked for 30 years. That was the time I spent working in Fort Erie .

D.M: The sports store, Reids Sports, is that anything to do with your family?

A.R: The Reids Sports store in Fort Erie was started by my sons Doug and Tom, and it's been... the people have been pretty good to them. They've been in business now about 12 years. Doug is the mainstay of the store and he does all the work here while Tom just puts a little bit of money into it, he lives in Minneapolis, St. Paul. My wife and Dougs wife work at the store and to this point they've done pretty good.

D.M: When did it open?

A.R: Oh gee, you got me. 12 years ago... The sports store opened in the early 70's, I know that. And as you should know, Tom played 12 years as a proffesional in the big leagues, he started with the Chicago Black Hawks and ended his career with the Minnesota North Stars. The reason that he had to retire early was because he had a severe rash caused by equipment and he had to take medication and the doctors told him if he kept it up it would kill him, so he had to retire. He had 11 or 12 years in the big leagues. Doug played in the minor

leagues, he played in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Toledo, Fort Huron, New York and other places on his tour. Doug didn't go for the barnstorming so he retired from hockey.

D.M: Did you live in Fort Erie through Prohibition?

A.R: I lived in Fort Erie during Prohibition in the states, that was when Fort Erie was quite active in the rumrunning business in those days and right along the river there was many boat houses and there was docks and at nighttime you could see the rumrunners digging for bars, sailing for Buffalo and being chased by the Peace Bridge patrols and stuff like that. You'd hear the odd gunshot and people did get wounded in those days. As a boy growing up in this town there was alot to see and as as far as I am concerned, as a child, I had alot of fun in Fort Erie. I was born in Fort Erie and I never want to leave it. I think it's one of the prettiest places in the world. I've been around a little bit, but I'm always glad when I get back in to my home town.

D.M: Were you here when the Peace Bridge was being built, did you see it?

A.R: I sure seen the Peace Bridge being built because all the abutments for the Peace Bridge, the cement abutments, were built right at the bottom of the street that I live on now, Bertie Street, they were all built on the sand beach right beside Dr. Douglas' house. They were built of wood, they were put on skids and every month they would have a celebration, they would break the champagne over each crib, they would skid it down into the river and the tugs would drag it up to where the Peace Bridge is now, they would fill it full of stones and cement and that was the start of the Peace Bridge. The piers for the Peace Bridge.

D.M: How long did it take them to build it?

A.R: The Peace Bridge took two years to build, from the beginning 'til it was finished.

D.M: Were you there at the opening ceremony?

A.R: I was there at the opening ceremony, yes. I seen the Prince of Wales and his brother open the Peace Bridge in the summer of 1927.

D.M: I notice you're wearing a T-shirt that says the Fire Company, were you a fireman?

A.R: Yes, I was a fireman at Fire Company No. 1 for 30 years. I'm on the exempt list now. I go to meetings and parades and help them with their jamboree but as for fighting fires, I've had enough of that and I'll let the younger people take it over.

D.M: Did you fight many big fires here in Fort Erie?

A.R: Yes, I fought many big fires in Fort Erie.

D.M: Can you remember any particular ones?

A.R: Well, I fought at the Lady of Victory School when the hostel burned down and I was at the Hart and Cooley fire and I've been at a number of fires at the Fort Erie Lumber Company.

D.M: Do you remember when they reconstructed the Old Fort?

A.R: Yes.

D.M: What happened at the opening ceremonies, were you there?

A.R: I was at the opening ceremonies at the Old Fort and as a child growing up, the fort that is there now, doesn't compare to what it was when I was a child. All it was was just two long walls and it was really dilapidated. In behind those walls were many moats or ponds, and many a day I used to skate there in the wintertime because there was lots of water in those moats and we used to skate in behind the fort. That was another thing about Erie Beach too, in the wintertime we did alot of skating in the swimming pools. It was just like an arena in there, the ice was just like glass and we could skate in the ponds at the Erie Beach swimming pool.

D.M: What happened to the park during the winter, were all the rides covered and everything like that? Did the whole place close right up?

A.R: Erie Beach yes. It closed in the winter. After Labour Day the beach was closed right up. They either boarded them up or closed the doors and the only people that worked in there were the maintenace crew. They used to do the painting in the wintertime and fix the rides and stuff like that.

D.M: Do you remember what Jarvis Street was like when you were a kid?

A.R: When I was a kid, Jarvis Street was a mud road. In around 1924 or 1925, there was only one paved road in Fort Erie which was the Boulevard and that was a cement road at that time. In around 1924 or 1925 the first road to be paved was Bertie Street. That was the center of the town of the original Fort Erie. That was the first road paved in Fort Erie. Jarvis Street was paved later on. But as I-said, as a child, when I was a real young child, Jarvis Street was just a mud road.

D.M: Were there lots of stores?

A.R: Yes, at that time, there were quite a few stores on Jarvis Street, yes.

D.M: Can you remember the names of any of them?

A.R: Well, there used to be Yeo's store, there used to be Atwoods, John T. James...

D.M: What was that?

A.R: That was another clothing store, and there used to be numerous drug stores and eating places. The old Post Office used to sit on the other side of the street on Jarvis Street, it was on the north side of Jarvis when I was a child.

D.M: What about the South End, were there many stores there?

A.R: The South End of Fort Erie now, was the original Fort Erie. There was stores all along the Boulevard. In those days there was quite a few stores and it was quite busy at that time. The Town Hall of Fort Erie was where the Legion stands right now, that was where all the business went in at the South End of town.

D.M: Tell me about the Peace Bridge Arena.

A.R: The Peace Bridge Arena was built after the Peace Bridge was built and it was owned by an American and it was where the Buffalo Bisons of the International League played their home games. At that time, Fort Erie Peace Bridge Arena was one of the best arenas in Ontario.

D.M: Is it still standing?

A.R: The arena was caved in in 1935. When the incident happened at that time, the night before it caved in, I was one of the players that played in the arena and we had about 2500 people in the arena that night. A real snowstorm came during the night and the snow piled on the one side of the arena and it buckled the roof and the roof caved in. In those days, it could have been fixed up pretty cheap, but the Mayor of Fort Erie at that time, was pretty upset at the ruins sitting there so long that he told them they'd either have to fix it up right away or tear it down and the owner tore the arena down. At that time that was one of the best arenas in the International League.

D.M: Was it rebuilt?

A.R: It wasn't rebuilt, it was demolished and then they started a program after the Second World War and it was called the Memorial Arena and it was used for quite a few years and then through fault of construction they figured it wasn't safe enough to play hockey in anymore, and it was torn down and the new arena was built adjacent to the old arena, where it stands today.

D.M: Where is it standing?

A.R: It's standing to the north side of the old arena.

D.M: Where was the old arena?

A.R: The old arena was on Douglas Street, it faced on Douglas Street.

D.M: Tell me about the Racetrack.

A.R: Well, as a young person growing up in the racing days in Fort Erie, the Fort Erie Racetrack was owned by a Mr. Madigan who had owned the track for quite a number of years and after his death, it was willed to his daughter and then, through financial arrangements, the Ontario Jockey Club took over the racetrack, and that stands there today. Originally, the old racetrack was quite a bit different than it is today, although it was real beautiful, it couldn't compare to the track they have today. The track at Fort Erie is one of the most beautiful sites of any racetrack in the world.

D.M: Did you ever go and bet on the horses?

A.R: I not only went and bet on the horses, I also worked at the original track, the Niagara Racing Association, and I worked for the Ontario Jockey Club also.

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

A.R: I sold the reserve seats in the stands.

D.M: How long did you work there for?

A.R: I might have worked there 5 years in the summertime.

D.M: I understand that the shoreline of the river was different at one time and it was filled in with dirt from the sugarbowl, is that right?

A.R: The shoreline of all the Niagara Parks from what you'd call the babyhole now, to the Old Fort in my day, was practically underwater. And all that area from the large tower at the swimming hole to the Old Fort was filled in with dirt taken from the sugarbowl on Gilmore Road. In those days, it was transported by truck and dumped in there and that was all filled in. That ride from Fort Erie from the Old Fort, from Niagara Falls on to Niagara-on-the-Lake is owned by the Niagara Parks Commision and it's one of the most beautiful parks and one of the most beautiful sights to see for any tourist coming into our town.

D.M: But they ruined the sugarbowl when they did that, it's full of water all the time now. It's no good as a park anymore.

A.R: They didn't ruin the sugarbowl, the sugarbowl is quite a thing to see in the summertime. It has a little bit of water in there now and again, but you must remember at one time, that was a great big

hill. That wasn't just level, that was a hill because I used to travel over that hill many times on my way to high school, and it was quite a climb over those hills. It really supplied a lot of dirt for the park along the river.

D.M: Is that why they took the fill, just to make the park, or was there another reason?

A.R: Actually, I think the fill was put there just to control the water and to make more area along the Niagara River.

D.M: Was that when they put that cement breakwall up?

A.R: Oh yes.

D.M: How long did it take for them to do it?

A.R: I would say that all the fill that was brought from the sugarbowl, it took practically 2 years before that shoreline was all filled in and seeded.

D.M: Which high school did you go to?

A.R: As a student, I went to the Fort Erie High School. I never did graduate, but I have 4 and 5 years, I took commercial courses and things like that. During Depression, it was pretty hard to get a job and it didn't do me any good.

D.M: What about elementary school, where did you go?

A.R: I went to Douglas School all my life.

D.M: Can you think of anything else you'd like to add?

A.R: Well, I've enjoyed this conversation with you today and I hope that I... what I've told you will help you and other people in the years to come.

D.M: Thank-you very much.

A.R: Thank-you and you're welcome.