

Diana Matthews interviewing John McMurtry at his home, 829 Niagara Blvd. April 24th, 1985.

**D.M:** Hi Mr. McMurtry.

**J.M:** Hi.

**D.M:** What's your full name?

**J.M:** John D. McMurtry.

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

**J.M:** Since Christmas of 1930.

**D.M:** That's when you were born?

**J.M:** Yep.

**D.M:** So you've lived here all your life?

**J.M:** Except for a period.

**D.M:** What was Fort Erie like when you were a kid, any different than it is now?

**J.M:** Essentially I doubt that it would be any different to a child now than it was then. The depression was on at that time so we didn't have the mobility and there wasn't the mobility of the population that you have now. A lot of people didn't have cars, a lot of people were out of work. We were fortunate, we weren't out of work during the Depression so I never did experience that. But I can remember the people that were out of work, they called them tramps or the transients that came and fell off the railway here or jumped off the railway here and came to the houses here to get food or handouts at that time. I don't think as a little person starting to school, it would be any different now than it was then.

**D.M:** What school did you go to?

**J.M:** Phipps Street. Rose Seaton.

**D.M:** DO you remember any of your teachers there?

**J.M:** Oh, I remember them all. Naturally Rose Seaton was running the school... but I know... I guess there's not too many of them still alive. My kindergarten teacher's still alive, she lives in Ridgeway. I think my grade 3 teacher still lives in Stevensville, I think the rest of them are all dead.

**D.M:** Did your family have a business in Fort Erie?

**J.M:** no.

**D.M:** What did they do?

**J.M:** My father worked at Horton, he worked through the Depression.

**D.M:** It kept running?

**J.M:** Oh, yeah. Well it kept a little bit going anyway, but it wasn't a very big operation during the Depression.

**D.M:** What were they making?

**J.M:** Same as they do now. Yeah, it was the same steel construction, same that is going on right now. Things in those days weren't as big as we know them now, same kind of thing. I don't know, the schools, they were fired with coal, not gas fired, so as kids you used to get dirtier in the coal bins, if you got into the coal bins as most little boys do. There wasn't any grass, it was all mud in the back yard, there was no paving around the school, things like that. It's no different than you would get in the field out beside the elementary schools now. They might have grass on them, but they get muddy if you get a few hundred kids piling around on them. The teachers are the same, they teach the same things.

**D.M:** What were the railways like then, did they play a big part in Fort Erie?

**J.M:** Oh yeah. There were steam railways then but the railways, they made the town a little bit more prosperous but they... they employed a lot of people, this was a big railway town. Growing up I didn't know anything about it. I probably didn't know anybody that worked on the railway. I had my first ride on an airplane before I had a ride on a train so the railways really didn't make any great impression on me as a youngster, but I can remember my mother complaining about them, we used to have to dust all the windowsills every morning, just because of the coal smoke dust that came in. We lived in the North End of town, that's where the prevailing winds brought the smoke and dust from the railway. You could hear the hooting and tooting over there all the time.

**D.M:** Has the population of Fort Erie changed very much, since you grew up here?

**J.M:** I don't know, you would be probably better equipped to tell me what the population of this town has done! I don't even know what the population is today, probably around 5000 in the town. Like right now when you talk town, I talk the old town of Fort Erie... but I suppose that within the town limits there's still over 5 or 6 thousand people. There's a lot more people around the outskirts than there was then, there wasn't anybody out there. So the population hasn't done much.

**D.M:** Do you remember when Bridgeburg and Amigary and Ridgeway were brought together as one in to the town of Fort Erie?

**J.M:** Vaguely.

**D.M:** Why did it happen?

**J.M:** Well, it was just Bridgeburg, Fort Erie and Amigary, which is west end, north end and south end all got together.

**D.M:** Were they actually separate places at one time?

**J.M:** I'm not sure about Amigary, but I think Bridgeburg had its own council. I don't recall when it amalgamated, around in mid-thirties, '36 or something like that. But it wasn't unusual, growing up, to see the name Bridgeburg. Like we lived in the north end which was Bridgeburg.

**D.M:** What about Jarvis Street, what was it like when you were a kid, were the stores any different?

**J.M:** Oh yes, the buildings weren't all there. What is now Brunton's and the store next to it, well, they weren't there when I was little. The Brigg's store was there, it's not where Bill Briggs had a store, it's now the bakery in there. And where Glenn's insurance office is now used to be a barber shop and a restaurant, what was it called, The White Corner Lunch. And then going on down the street, naturally Ruskin's appliances weren't there, used to be a butcher shop in there, Fretz's were in there. And where Brunton's and things are now, used to be a butcher shop there, can't remember who ran it now... Whites I think. Next was where they built the A&P, they built that in the early forties I guess, I started to work there in '43 I guess. There used to be a Chinese laundry next to that and there was Everetts Dairy, photo studio, and old Mr. Watt used to have a bicycle store, which you've probably never seen a bicycle store! That's all he did, fixed bikes. The Robbins Building which is still there, where Halls Shoe Store is, if you look up on the top, it's called the Robbins building. He had a shoe store there. On the other side of the street, Baker's store which is the vacant lot there. But the restaurant across from Glenn's, that was a tobacconists store, purveyor of candies to all the kids in town. And down that side of the street there used to be a butcher shop and Don Grinham's father had a.... he's the butcher at the I.G.A. Store.... his father had a butcher shop right at the top of the street there, in fact, I worked for him in the late forties. The Valachos family had a restaurant further on down the street and Mike Lukachik had a shoe repair shop, in fact I think, I don't know if you know him, Harry Simpson, he works on the Customs, he does shoe repairs, he's got the machinery out of Mike Lukachik's

repair shop. And from that restaurant, Valachos', I forget what was in there, but before they built... the Heckman's built the, what is presently there's a barber shop and a restaurant and a pool room in there... I don't remember what was in there. I remember Heckman's Barber Shop and the pool room used to be across the road, but they built... I forget what year they built that building. It must have been in the early forties because I can remember when it was built, I wasn't old enough to go in the pool room, so that was in the early forties! I can remember Holsworth's Hardware Store was always there and the bank and the Canadian Tire Shop was in there and there was a dairy and the Post office. Going on down, the rest of the buildings were there as long as I can remember. I am sure there are people that can remember when those various odd buildings were built, but I can't. I can vaguely remember when Atwood's... I can remember Atwood's store was always on Jarvis Street, previous to that there was a store on the corner of Dufferin and Klauck Street and I can remember when it burned down. I wasn't old enough to go to the fire but I was old enough to be curious enough to go to it after the fire as a kid... rummage about. I can't tell you what year it was but that would be in the archives, in the files of the newspaper. Jarvis Street was always.... it was paved as long as I can remember, I don't remember when it wasn't paved. I believe when my mother came to Fort Erie it wasn't paved. As a youngster, at the bottom of Jarvis Street where the Customs had a boat dock there, that's where Fleet used to have their... keep their airplanes there. I had my first ride.. no I had one of my first rides in an airplane out of that dock. I think my first ride in an airplane was off the field at Fleet. As I recall, people have reminded me... my parents reminded me, I think that was about 1935 or '36, my first ride in an airplane.

**D.M:** What was the South End like?

**J.M:** Don't know. As a child I never got there! The only thing we went to... to go say to the South End would be to get to the ferry to go to Buffalo or to go across the Peace Bridge. And as I say, families weren't as mobile as they are now, so if there's no reason to go down there, you didn't go! So I didn't know anything about the South End until I was old enough to have a bicycle or something like this you know.. to go by yourself.

**D.M:** What did you do for entertainment when you were a kid?

**J.M:** The Bellard Theatre was on Dufferin Street so as kids you usually went Saturday afternoon to the movies because they wouldn't let you in at night, we weren't old enough to go at night. There was no other regimented entertainment. In the summertime you swam and in the wintertime you skated if there was any ice around.

**D.M:** Where did you skate?

**J.M:** If there was any cold winters there was a rink at school and other than that we used to skate out on the golf course on the creek or there was a swamp out at the end of Bowen Road at Crook Street, in behind there. We used to skate... there was never good skating on the river, your parents wouldn't let you near the river in the wintertime anyway, if they could keep you away and that was all, there was no arena, because our arena fell down in '37 I think. It collapsed so consequently we had no artificial ice in this part of the country and really no hills to slide on except at the south end of town but it was too far away for kids from the north end to go down there. Actually, the biggest hill we had are those little mounds of earth west of Central Avenue as you walk across the bridge there, that was the biggest hill we had to slide down! A lot of the parents didn't like you there because of the trains cause you slid down towards the train tracks. But that was what we had to slide on!

**D.M:** Did you ever go to Crystal Beach?

**J.M:** As a youngster, maybe once a year, your parents might take you, just about as often probably as your parents had to take you at that age. And I know it's probably the same number of times that I took mine when they were young. When we got a bit older we went when we could get there on our own. It was very good, they had a dance hall there and you could go and listen to all the big name bands.

**D.M:** Which ones?

**J.M:** Oh, Dorsey and all the big bands of the... of that era. They didn't charge you to get in but it was 10 cents a dance, so if you didn't dance, you could sit there all night and listen to the music or you could dance for 10 cents a dance.

**D.M:** Did you go to Buffalo much?

**J.M:** No. Well, you'd go over with your parents, sporadically. It wasn't a habitual... traipsing across the river. We used to swim in the river,

which kids nowadays don't do. Or not to any great extent anyway. When I grew up, Williamses down at the bottom of Bowen Road, he ran the Williams Gold, Mr. Williams, I guess they still run Williams Gold, Mr. Williams always built a big dock out there for the kids and it was a wonderful swimming hole. So we swam and like most other kids in Fort Erie.... they don't consider you're a good swimmer until you can swim across the river and back.

**D.M:** To Buffalo?

**J.M:** Yes. So that's the first thing you do as you get big enough to be able to swim, you swim across the river to Buffalo.

**D.M:** Did you do it?

**J.M:** Oh, yeah.

**D.M:** Isn't it dangerous?

**J.M:** I don't think so. I can't even tell you whether my own children did it. They may have but when we were growing up there would be gangs of us, great big groups of people who would walk all the way from Bowen Road all the way to the babyhole.

**D.M:** The what?

**J.M:** The babyhole. You know where that is, don't you? Well the babyhole is the swimming hole at the south end of town. Right beside where the Peace Bridge and the store is there. All the people still congregate there on the sand there, that's the babyhole. And we'd jump in the water there and swim across the river and swim back again and end up at Bowen Road.

**D.M:** Has there always been alot of American tourists coming to Fort Erie?

**J.M:** Yup. Well, always because the Americans owned the lakeshore, which they still do and I would imagine they own most of Crystal Beach, a good percentage of it and a good percentage of Crescent Beach too. The Americans, as I say, they live here and they shop here and as tourists, they don't come here. Nobody stops here as a tourist attraction really other than the people that come to take a look at our fort. The biggest influx of Americans you see in the summertime are when the races are on, the racetrack people. But as children and as children today, they don't see them.

I don't know why kids don't swim in the river anymore, do you swim in the river?

**D.M:** Sure do.

No, like growing up in the river, everybody swam in the river, there weren't any swimming pools and so you swam in the river and nobody drowned. I can remember as a youngster, anybody that drowned wasn't from Fort Erie. They were from Buffalo or came in as tourists and went swimming and the reason they drowned was because they panicked when they hit the current. But growing up with the river there, you learned not to fight the river, you go with the river and that's why you can swim all those miles, cause you don't swim, you just stand out there and float and if you got enough people, you got people to talk to and you float down the river. So that's why it's easy to swim back and forth across the river. It's hard to swim across the river if you started at Jarvis Street, if you gone and done that, because it's a hard swim cause you usually end up over on Strawberry Island and from Strawberry Island, it's not hard to get to, but it's a son of a gun to get back! That's a hard swim coming back. We used to end up down, not quite to the shipyards, but down in that area, and you had to swim because that's a big bay and there's no current, so you had to swim all that way, you had to do some work. Then you had to walk all the way home again too!!

**D.M:** What's the shipyards?

**J.M:** The marina down... 2 or 3 miles down the river. I'm not old enough to remember the shi pyards as an operating functional in the first World War, or in that era. The river has always been a great attraction for children. I found out about it when our children grew up here and they could see the water. That's where they go! So you have to take a stick along with you the first few times to teach the... especially toddlers, that they don't go to the river unescorted or unrequested.

**D.M:** You lived in Fort Erie through the second World War, is that right?

**J.M:** Oh, yes.

**D.M:** How did that affect you or affect the town?

**J.M:** It didn't affect me at all, in that as a child, nothing affects you. You go where you're pushed. But I can remember the airplanes and I can remember the troop trains going through on the bridge across the river and coming through this way. They all came in to the country, I don't remember them out of the country but the troop trains came from Buffalo and I guess they were on their way to Detroit. During

the war, they built the hostel over on Central Avenue which is now school system, where the Catholic Church is now and that housed all the girls that came to service all the airplane business. I wasn't old enough to have that group of girls influence my living in any way! I am sure there are a lot of people still living in town that.... the girls came as aircraft workers that started the war, or shortly after that.

**D.M:** Did Fleet make the planes here?

**J.M:** Yes. They built trainers and the Fleet Finches and the Fleet Cornells. They did work on Ansons and they did work on Lancasters. As I remember there was one Lancaster that came into Fleet for a refit and as I recall they built a ramp at the end of the runway to get him back out again. He could get in alright, but he couldn't get out. They bounced him off the end of the runway and away he went. As I recall, there was only one airplane crash here. It was a Fleet airplane and an airplane from Bel-Air in Buffalo collided and both those airplanes came down out near Erie Downs Golf Course, the golf course out on Gilmore Road. But that's where the remains came down. And I can remember I had a few instruments out of one of the airplanes, a few bits and pieces that were left over. Naturally every kid in town, once we heard about it, gravitated out to see the disaster site.

**D.M:** That was during the second World War?

**J.M:** Yes. That would be in probably 1940 or '41, something like that. I can't tell you the date but it's on the records. It would have to have been in the Times Review, I'm sure of that. I don't remember the names of the people involved, but as I recall, it was a Bel-Air Cobra aircraft, which is an aluminum airplane and the Fleet thing was a wooden and canvas airplane. The wooden airplane didn't last very long, it just whoooosh! It came down in little pieces about this big. (size of a quarter) There wasn't much left of it.

**D.M:** Do you remember any other accidents or fires that happened in Fort Erie?

**J.M:** No, other than the fire of the Atwoods store on Dufferin Street burned down. I wasn't old enough to go to it, and I believe it was at night and there was another fire on Courtwright Street, I think, a chemical plant or a paint factory, it wasn't Pratt & Lambert, it was another one. I forget the name of it right now, but it burned



down. And I wasn't old enough to go to it either. So I've lived here all my life and I've never been to a big fire, never been to a fire.

**D.M:** What about really bad weather, was there any terrible storms that you can remember?

**J.M:** Oh yeah. We have storms here, sporadically. We had them 50 years ago, same as we had the latest one... '79 or '80 or whatever they called it, or '78 or whatever it was, which was a bad storm, it didn't keep my kids in the house. The schools were closed for a few days, but just about every year you close the schools for a few days. Nowadays because the busses can't run. It used to be when I was a kid, they closed the schools because we couldn't get to school, because we didn't have any plows. As I recall, the plow was pulled by a horse, so it didn't make much of an intrusion on a big snowstorm! But I can remember, I'd only be 6 or 7 years old, down Highland Avenue there'd be one path for one person. You go down that trail to Central Avenue and that's where the horse and wagon or horse and sleigh would come to, to deliver the milk. That was as close... he couldn't come up the street, you had to go down the street to get milk. The town was tied right up, but there just wasn't any equipment to come along to clear off the street, there wasn't any money to do it with during the Depression either. But everybody survived it. You probably have pictures and records of the old arena that fell down with a snowstorm.

**D.M:** What happened to it?

**J.M:** Collapsed. The weight of the snow collapsed the whole building. As I recall, it happened in March. '37, I think.

**D.M:** I know there was a blizzard in 1939, do you remember that?

**J.M:** No. It seemed, when I was a kid, that we had one every year! No, '39 doesn't ring any particular bell with me. But I think it was '37 when the arena fell down, but I could be off there too. It was a big storm that hit us in March of that year as I recall. Big heavy snowflakes, this big around, ( size of golfballs) and tons of it! Just collapsed it.

**D.M:** You said there was horses and buggies, when did they die out and become replaced by cars?

**J.M:** I don't remember buggies. I remember horses. When I was a youngster, I think my first ambition in life... I wanted to become a garbageman! The garbageman had his own horse and wagon and he used to come

the house. But as a kid we used to climb on the wagon and ride around town with him and we thought it was a great job. I guess our parents thought... when we came home, we went straight to the bath. But he had a wagon and the man that delivered ice had a wagon and the breadman had a wagon and the milkman.

**D.M:** What about the mailman?

**J.M:** For mail, you went to the Post Office to get it. I don't know when we got mailmen, it was well after the war, I'm sure of that. Even here I don't get mail. I have to go to the Post Office. The horse and wagon, they delivered, if they didn't do that, they had a pushwagon. I don't know how many there were in town. There were different people with pushwagons that would deliver house to house or go up and down the streets selling vegetables in the summertime. I don't remember any of their names anymore. I'm sure some of the older people that dealt with... at that time, I wasn't old enough to rush out and buy things, but the people that would be of that age, my parents age, they would have bought things from the greengrocers. The only fellow I can remember specifically, two of them, was Lenny Jackson was the garbageman and Larry Provins who was the Canada Bread man. The dairy was there, but I don't remember the man that drove the wagon, I don't know his name and I don't remember the icemans name. The iceman was good with kids, we always liked when they broke up a block of ice to take it in to the house, there was little pieces....and that's good to a kid, it was almost as good as getting an ice cream cone in those days! But I don't ever recall people driving around in buggies.

**D.M:** Did your mother ever work in Fort Erie?

**J.M:** No.

**D.M:** How many brothers and sisters did you have?

**J.M:** None.

**D.M:** Where did you work, you mentioned a couple of stores that you worked at, what did you do?

**J.M:** I worked in the butcher shop at the A&P and the butcher shop at Grinhams, I learned a little bit about the butcher business, not much. We worked there in the summertime and after school and Saturdays, things like that.

**D.M:** What did you end up doing, what do you do now?

**J.M:** Right at the moment I'm retired but I worked at Horton Steel for 30 odd years and as the business there is as it has been for the last few years, we retired, and I'm presently working for a company in Toronto.

**D.M:** What did you do at Horton Steel?

**J.M:** I was a supervisor of construction, which is essentially what I'm still doing. Just constructing different things, that's all.

**D.M:** What do you know about the Old Fort?

**J.M:** When I was real little, the Old Fort wasn't there, it was just kind of a few humps and bumps in the ground down there. And as a youngster, all there was left was part of one wall. Then they rebuilt the thing in '38 or '39 and it's like it is right now, when they rebuilt it. I wasn't old enough to be in the pageant that they put on when they opened the Old Fort, but I was at the performance, or one of them anyway. I don't know how many there were, I've got a pamphlet or a program I guess you'd call it, of what was going on in there. I would assume in that program, it probably said who was in some of the performances, but I would think if you got people 10 years older than me, they would know who was in it. When we were in high school, 2 or 3 of my friends worked for the Parks Commission as guides at the Fort and so consequently if you have one friend who's a guide, you can get in. We used to congregate there, it's a good place to keep out of trouble, it was enjoyable to have kind of free run of the museum cause you could prowl around while you were waiting for your friend to become unbusy so you could sit and talk, you had the free run of the facilities, so you could poke and look and read the stuff that was there. There's some very interesting things in the museum. I don't know anything else about the Fort, it was a great gathering place for Sunday school picnics and that kind of thing. I assume it still is. It's proved itself that it was worthwhile to repair it and I know before.... one time the Parks Commission owned Niagara Falls Fort, Niagara-on-the-Lake Fort, and I don't know whether Jack Teal told me, he was on the board of the Parks Commission, they were losing the Fort at Niagara-on-the-Lake to the Federal Parks system, and I told him, I said you better bring some of the cannons out of that fort and get them in our fort, because we have ambushers up there that don't have any guns sticking out of them. He said, "Oh we can't do that," and I said after the Federal Government

gets their hand on that fort, you'll never get the guns out of it. Right now, you control it, and you can move the guns wherever you want them. So he got some Niagara-on-the-Lake guns, they moved them and I don't know whether they had a squabble over it or not and I don't care! But we got the guns here.

**D.M:** I noticed you have a cannon in your front yard, where did that come from?

**J.M:** Oh, I got that in the states about 25 years ago.

**D.M:** It has nothing to do with Fort Erie?

**J.M:** No, it's not an old one.

**D.M:** Thanks very much for talking to us.

**J.M:** Okay, it was very pleasurable.