

Michael Near interviewing Mrs. Rita R Near at her home at 139 Bertie St.

M.N: When did you come to Canada Mrs. Near?

R.N. 1940.

M.N: Why did you come to Canada ?

R.N: I married a Canadian and came here to live.

M.N: What was the town like then ?

R.N: Well it was a good deal smaller than it is now, about 3,000 people lived here, a very nice town, a railroad town, the railroad was the main industry then.

M.N: You lived in Fort Erie or what you would call Fort Erie at that time?

R.N: Yes, it had been Bridgeburg up to 1936.

M.N: And then it became Fort Erie ?

R.N: Yes, and Amigari was also incorporated into the town of Fort Erie.

M.N: That would have been called the west end ?

R.N: Yes, what would be called the west end.

M.N: Did you ever use the ferry that came across from Buffalo ?

R.N: Oh yes, many times, when I first came here I was working in Buffalo I used to come across every day and it was rather difficult because at that time Canada was on double day-light savings time, there was a 2 hour time difference. Canada was already in the war and the States wasn't.

M.N: Was there rationing then ?

R.N: Oh yes, I don't remember if it had started just yet, I believe it was a little later. At that time it was the phony war, even though England had been bombed but every body thought it would blow over, it wouldn't last long.

M.N: What was mostly rationed during the war ?

R.N: Meat, butter, sugar, that was about it, there wasn't a lot of things rationed here, many things were rationed in the states.

M.N: At that time how was Fort Erie, say ethnically.

R.N: Not nearly as diverse as its since become, Scotch, Irish, a few Italians, I was a Catholic and at that time only 10% of the population of Canada was Catholic, it changed greatly during the and after the war, mostly after the war when people from other countries started coming here.

M.N: During the war there was a large influx of people into Fort Erie ?

- R.N:** Oh yes, people came here to work, Fleet was very busy, they hired many women, because the men were in the military service and thats when they built Winston Hall the residence for these women.
- M.N:** Thats were Saint Michaels Church is now ?
- R.N:** Yes, later it became Our Lady of Victory School but it burnt, it was just a wooden structure and it had been built rather hastily to house women who came here to work from other places and Saint Michaels was built here.
- M.N:** Do you think a lot of these people stayed after the war ?
- R.N:** I think most of them did, many of these girls married local residents, especially as the fellows came back from the service.
- M.N:** What was the biggest hard ship during the war ?
- R.N:** Not knowing if your men were dead or alive. I don;t think we had any real hard ship, there was plenty of work, the few things that were rationed you could do with out, there was plenty of other things to eat, you never went hungry.
- M.N:** Was the morale of the people good then ?
- R.N:** Yes, I think so, especally after the States got into the war. Canada, the States and England of course pulled together and I don't think we ever doubted we would win the war.
- M.N:** When the was over, say, after the first war there was a recession was there something like that after the war?
- R.N:** No I don't really think so, there may have been a little drop of course the airplane factories- my two sisters worked in an air-craft plant in Buffalo and on V.J. Day everyone just dropped thier tools and walked out they had no more jobs, ~~because~~ they were making war-planes.
- M.N:** You never had any trouble because of being an American citizen living in ?
- R.N:** Oh no, no I've been treated wonderfully in Canada.
- M.N:** It was mentioned that a lot of women when they were pregnant had to go to Buffalo to have there baby, there wasn't a hospital in Fort Erie. When did Douglas Hospital open ?
- R.N:** I believe that must have been in the thirties because the hospital was here when I came in 1940 and women went to Buffalo simply because it was closer then Niagara Falls were the other hospital was.
- M.N:** Did Fort Erie seem to go through an economic boom aft er the war?

R.N: I wouldn't say a boom, the rail roads were very busy and Fleet held on, they were making war planes, but they got other contracts and the Horton was busy things didn't seem to bad, at that time, of course everything was rail road, people weren't shipping by plane, for one thing it wasn't economically feasible then gradually the planes took over and the rail road started dying.

M.N: When did you think the rail road died in Fort Erie?

R.N: Well, I think they closed Victoria Station in the sixties, it was moved to Montrose at the Falls, but business had been dropping off, they used to be - I don't want to guess, I think there were 40 trains a day going through Fort Erie a day and then it dropped to only a few, then there was practically none.

M.N: That was steam engine ?

R.N: Yes.

M.N: You lived on Courtwright St. near the main line over the International was it a inconvenience?

R.N: It was dirty, the water tower was across the street from us and the the trains would stop and take on water, there was a lot of dirt in the coal, at that time they just shovelled the coal into the engines to make them go.

M.N: Speaking of coal, when did you change over to a gas furnace ?

R.N: Well, when we first moved up here in 1945 it was a coal furnace but that was very inconvenient, coal became more and more expensive, I think we changed over in 1950.

M.N: Do you notice its more convenient?

R.N: Oh yes, we use to have to go down- we'd come home late and the furnace would be right out and you'd have to go down and shake it down and get it started, then wait till the coal gas burned off then you put more coal on the - and put the damper down and all this when you were very tired and cold- it was very inconvenient- so the gas was wonderful compared to that.

M.N: During the war did you listen to the radio ?

R.N: Oh yes, always, because every day of course there was news, there was many correspondents over there, you got the news almost as it happened, you've heard recently about Ernie Pyle on the television and Edward R. Muroe and all those correspondents, there was news every day, good or bad, it was a bad time, war is a terrible time and the young fellows, its always the young ones who die- thats terrible.

M.N: There was quite a few men who left Fort Erie ?

R.N: Oh yes, many men left from Fort Erie and we have our few heroes John Dietrich the first fellow from Fort Erie killed in the war, and Jimmy Martin, he flew a burning plane back from Europe across the channel to save his men and he was badly burnt, he kept them from falling into the hands of the Germans, I consider that a hero. Incidentally he's the Father of Doug Martin who now has the jewelry store, that his Grand father started.

M.N: Where's that, on Jarvis Street ?

R.N: Gibsons- Mr. Gibson was a watch maker and he was the Grand father of Doug Martin.

M.N: Would you consider Jarvis St. to be called the commercial centre?

R.N: Yes, though the south end was very busy at that time, there were a lot more stores and not so many restaurants as there are now and of course the people down there shopped, and there was the Post Office, you had to go and pick up your mail.

M.N: There was no mail delivery ?

R.N: No, not until, I forget just when it started, around 1948, the first carriers were Frank Allen and Gus Sally and I worked with both of them for many years.

M.N: How long did you work at the Post Office?

R.N: Thirteen years.

M.N: So you have noticed a big change ?

R.N: Oh yes, its so built up and stretched out and its still a nice town, I like it here.

M.N: Do you think some improvements could have made in the town planning ?

R.N: Oh, I don't know I think they did pretty well, they went out towards Crescent Park, where there's a lot of nice land and it was a bit circumscribed up in the north end, it ended at the river, I think all in all they haven't done too bad, they connected the town with the Central Ave. bridge, that wasn't there, so you had to go all the way around, that sort of kept the town separated.

M.N: When you came over here to live, did you notice a division between the people who lived in Bridgeburg and Fort Erie?

R.N: Well actually they were two separate towns ?

M.N: And they were considered two separate towns ?

R.N: Not in 1940 the town until 1936 and Amigari considered itself separate.

M.N: Did the town make any - say the political structure - there was mayors considered better than others - Jack Teal is considered one of the best mayors, then for personality and being outgoing there was Herb Guess, did you know any of them?

R.N: I knew Herb Guess slightly and I knew Mr. Teal and he was always going- trying to make things better for the town. I only knew Mr. Guess slightly but I understand he was a good mayor, he was in for a long time.

M.N: Did your economic conditions pick up, sort of grow with the town, do you notice the change, more cars, television, the conveniences we take for granted, do you believe they've helped?

R.N: Oh certainly, well take a washer and dryer I didn't have that when my kids were little and you washed every day and heating the water and rinsing one thing or the other, put them out on the line then drag them back in and if you left them out, overnight on Courtwright St. they would be all black because of the soot from the trains, so now you just throw them into one machine and then throw them into another and you have your television- I don't go out much, its a lot of entertainment.

M.N: The other thing we mentioned was the ice-box?

R.N: Oh yes, that was an awful nuisance, you couldn't keep anything froze it thawed in a couple of days because the ice would melt and in hot weather the ice melted more quickly.

M.N: How often did the ice man come?

R.N: Oh they delivered about 3 times a week, you put a sign up in the window- 25,50,75, and a 100 on different corners, so you'd turn the sign to what you wanted 25 or what ever, he would bring that in but lots of times it would be all gone before he would come again and then you stuff- you couldn't keep ice cream or anything like that in the house. I often think when my Mother in Law would have family dinners at tye last minute some one would run down to Cornells Drug Store to get the ice cream for desert because otherwise it wouldn't keep.

M.N: How much was a block of ice?

R.N: I don't really remember, it wasn't very dear, I think it was a quarter for 50 pounds.

M.N: Was that manufactured in Fort Erie, the ice?

R.N: Oh yes, up where the arena is now, that was a ice-house, George Vassey had a big ice house up there and it was quite a thriving business, especially in the summer they delivered up to the summer cottages, up around the beach.

M.N: Was this a big refrigeration unit up there to make the ice?

R.N: I don't know how you exactly make ice they made it I know that.

M.N: Were you ever in Crystal Beach during the big band era?

R.N: Oh yes, it had such a beautiful ballroom, I don't remember exactly which band we danced to I think it was Woody Herman it was very romantic and bubbly, at night the moon on the lake and the Crystal Beach boat ride was beautiful.

M.N: They used to go on cruises?

R.N: Yes they used to go on cruises, 3 hours every Saturday night, we used to dance and it was lovely, it was so cool.

M.N: Crystal Beach had a reputation for its big bands, they had the best.....?

R.N: Oh, some were wonderful.

M.N: Do you know any names?

R.N: I know Benny Goodman appeared there, Glen Miller some of the others, I don't remember, it was a long time ago but the big timers were all small timers at one time, they were travelling around, taking gigs when they could get them.

M.N: In our research we've found that prior to the big band era, square dancing was popular. Did you ever square dance?

R.N: That was my second home but that was in Buffalo, that was Grant and Ferry a lot of Canadians went there, we really enjoyed the Sod Busters and Gully Jumpers, it was wonderful and great fun, Square dancing sounds corny now but it really is a lot of fun.

M.N: Was there some popular bands in squaredancing?

R.N: No they were mostly local out fits, for instance the one that played was a man and his wife and then his son, his wife played the piano, the fellow who played the trumpet, he worked at General Electric with my father. So they were just local people, they played very well and we enjoyed it.

M.N: The Canadians would you get that?

R.N: It was at the foot of -well I guess a street that isn't there anymore Commercial St. down near the foot of main St. in Buffalo and you went down this little side street and got the boat.

R.N: -it took-I don't know how long it took to get to Crystal Beach but it was a lovely time in the summer, Buffalo was hot and then the Lake cruises on Saturday night.

M.N: What was on the boat itself?

R.N: There was a big room for dancing and there was a bar, people didn't drink that much and a refreshment stand, it was a pretty big boat.

M.N: How many people.....?

R.N: Oh I don;t know but it must have been hundreds. I think there was two of them, the Americana and the Canadiana, its the Canadiana they're trying to refurbish now.

M.N: How much would a cruise like that cost?

R.N: Maybe .50¢, of course that was a lot of money in those days, at the time I was making \$12.50 a week, but the money seemed to go farther then, for some reason.

M.N: The ferry was only a nickel?

R.N: The ferry cost a nickel, and some times they had entertainment of a sort on there, I don't think they were paid, they were just local talent, people would throw nickels in or what ever- for one thing the trip was only 10-15 minutes to cross the river,it was a easy way to get across, I took the ferry all the time when I was working over there, just walk up to Niagara St. and get the bus

M.N: How long would it take for the trip?

R.N: Oh as I say 15 minutes. Its only less then a mile across that river of course they were fighting the current too.

M.N: In the winter, if the ferry couldn't get across was there another way to get across before the Peace Bridge?

R.N: Well by the rail road bridge, but the ice never seemed to stop it, there was never that much ice in the river, the ice would all be in lake and then in the spring it would go down the river.

M.N: Do you remember anything about building the Peace Bridge?

R.N: No, at that time I was only 12 years old, small girls don't pay that much attention to such things. I do remember seeing pictures in the paper- the Prince of Wales opened the bridge and of course there was a big improvement because it was so easy for transportation to cross the river.

M.N: So you came to Fort Erie when it was already incorporated?
Do you remember who was mayor when you came?

R.N: No I don't- it could have been Mr. Price, he was mayor for quite a while, but there again I didn't pay attention.

M.N: What about the police force?

R.N: There was two men, Chief Andy Griffin and his assistant.

M.N: Do you know who that would be? Chirp Matthews, does that ring a bell?

R.N: I think Mr. Matthews was a rail-road policeman.

M.N: Our information has said that he got the job because he owned a motorcycle?

R.N: Maybe he did, but I remember, this would be about 1942 because my little boy would be about 2, drifted away from home and I was frantic, running up and down the streets, looking for him and someone had found him and took him to the police station, so I went over to the police station and it was closed, Chief Griffin had gone home for lunch and he took the little boy home, so I went to his house on High St. and collected my little boy but at that time they only had 2 policemen and they closed down the station at lunch time, of course there wasn't much crime either, the occasional drunk.... speeding driver some thing like that.

M.N: What about the Fire Department?

R.N: They didn't have this fire hall.

M.N: Thats the fire hall on Bertie St. ?

R.N: Yes, thats comparatively new, and the one on Jarvis is new, but on Bertie was a sort of little shack were they kept the fire-engine in there, but they always had a fire department.

M.N: How big would you say the town was then?

R.N: I think there was 3,000 people and it was not so spread out as it is now- its built up so far towards Cresent Park, at that time there was a few summer cottages out there now its homes and every thing and even since the war, what they called war time houses they all went up then.

M.N: That was because of Fleet and Horton?

R.N: Yes, they brought in people to work and the new churches, we have several new churches around here

R.N: They're all new, the Luther an and the Baptist, the big Cathedral on the Blvd. that was St. Paul, St. Mike's was a little church on Gilmore Road, and St. Joesph was a little church on Garrison, now of course the new St. Michaels- what I consider new- in the last 20 or 30 years.

M.N: When did the first Catholic Church open in Fort Erie?

R.N: Oh, there was one here when I came, I don't know.

M.N: Where was that located?

R.N: That would be St. Joesph, I think so, because that cemetary is very old.

M.N: Did you notice any prejudice towards Americans?

R.N: Not a great deal, I think a lot of people didn't know many Americans, I don't think there was as much prejudice as there is now, you here "these damn Yankees" I say it my self some times-when there's a great deal of traffic-let's not get into that.

M.N: The town was pretty isolated at that time, with in itself?

R.N: Yes, pretty well, before the war, just a nice peaceful little town.

M.N: Every one knew each other?

R.N: Oh yes, my Mother in Law knew just about every one in town.

M.N: You mentioned she never locked her doors?

R.N: I never knew her to lock her doors, and that was strange to me because I was raised in the city, were you locked your doors and pulled your shades down when it got dark. She thought I was kind of weird because I pulled my shades down.

M.N: The town, do you think it can develop much more?

R.N: Not unless we can get more industry, we don't have all that much, the rail road has practicaly died, we have Fleet, I think Horton is safe, there just isn't a great deal, they could attract some new industry, that would be great.

M.N: You worked in the Post Office we mentioned before, do you know any thing about the history of the Post Office, was it always there on Jarvis St.?

R.N: I don't really know, I think theres a corner stone there thats marked in the thirties, but I think when I first came here and I looked on there it was a small post office on Jarvis St. and then it expanded in to the big municipal building as it is now, because I remember they just had a tier of boxes, before they had any letter carriers and

R.N: the one in the south end was just a store and there also was the boxes and of course when we moved up here to Bertie St. I used to walk down every day to get the mail.

M.N: Do you remember some of the stores down on Jarvis St.?

R.N: There was a lot of drug stores that we don't have now, there is one now since the Vietnamese came in, there used to be Lonsbury Cornell's, and Camns, and then theres a great big old A&P, and Woolworths, thats gone, and Stedmans, and Eatons is gone, quite a few stores and there was a few butcher shops, there gone, they just sold meat, reall old time butcher shops, which were nice, and there was a great big store at the back of the corner of Jarvis and Central - a couple of big houses there- darn, I forget the name of the people who owned it- Young- but it was a great big old house and store, it was a confectionary and there all gone, torn down.

M.N: Did you do a lot of shopping in Buffalo?

R.N: At one time I did, childrens clothes were much cheaper, and customs didn't seem as strict as they are now, and the dollar was close to par which made a big difference and people used to go over and buy a few things- but you really can't do that any more, it cost you to much.

M.N: How about the Fort Erie Race Track, did you ever have a chance to go up to the Fort Erie Race Track in the forties and fifties?

R.N: Oh yes, the main entrance was on Catharine St. and there was a lot of houses along there and there all gone and it was sort of countryish up there and it was one big gate you went in and of course now the grand stand, the grand stand, its been there a long time.

M.N: Was it kept in good shape?

R.N: Oh yes, its always been nice, but all this beautification was fairly recently- the beautiful landscaping that they have now- but it was there for a very long time, I used to go before I was married to the Race Track.

M.N: Was there other places of attraction for the Americans, to come over for, say Erie Beach or Crystal Beach or the track?

R.N: Well, not to me there wasn't, but to other people - my brother in law, he speaks of when he used to come over on the ferry and have some beer and cheese and crackers, and then go back again.

R.N: And I suppose a lot of Americans enjoy that- Canadian beer and cheese, and there was things like street dances and so forth, it was a good town, and it still is.

M.N: You must notice a big difference down at the south end of Fort Erie?

R.N: Oh heavens yes, there is so many big new resturants down town, it used to be little shops and there was a couple of drug stores along there and Sullivans Fish and Chips, and they were just great, and a couple of little novelty stores, they sold candy and tobbaoco and newspapers that sort of thing, Camns drug store and a- I forget was it Lonsbury? - Livingstons - that was it, there's a resturant there now, but they were little wooden places, a dry good store- Youngs, and the post office, and the theatre,

M.N: Who owned that theatre?

R.N: I believe Ziffs and it was a lovely movie theatre and there was one at the north end, the Bellard, were Don Dean's lot is now, but I guess movies then were not that big, they started to die out when television came in, and they turned the one down here into a bowl ing alley.

M.N: Do you notice a lot of the old buildings that are gone now?

R.N: Oh yes, so many, hardly any down in the south end- I don't get down there very much, I went down there last summer and I hardly reconized it, all these giant new resturants.

M.N: Do you think its an improvement?

R.N: I suppose in a way, it brings a lot of business to the town.

M.N: Niagara-on-the-Lake has a very strict control over anything that is put in, they won't allow a McDonalds or fast food- they're very tight on the question of building down there, for the image of the town, do you think Fort Erie should go that way?

R.N: No I believe in free enterprise, if someone has the determination and willing to work hard and a little money to start a business why stop them, I don't think thats fair.

M.N: There's been a few people from Fort Erie that have made it, such as John L.Kraft, did you ever hear anything about him?

R.N: No, I'm afraid he was before my time.

M.N: What about Sir Harry Oakes, did you ever hear about Sir Harry Oakes...?

R.N: I heard a lot of legends.

R.N: A lot of stories, and again this was before my time.

M.N: Any stories in particular concerning Fort Erie...?

R.N: Not really about Fort Erie, but he had some connection with the town but that he was a bum, riding the rails, or rods, what ever they call them and he was thrown off and at the spot he was thrown off he discovered gold or oil or diamonds, what ever it might have been, but as I say its a story, I'm not sure of the truth of it. He was murdered you know they thought by his son in law, but I don't think it was ever proven.

M.N: I guess there's still a lot of land in the area thats still in his name?

R.N: Oh yes, .

M.N: What about construction of the Old Fort, do you remember anything about that, when they worked on the Old Fort, was the Fort completed by the time you came over?

R.N: The Old Fort was there in the time of 1812, how old do you think I am?

M.N: The fort was rebuilt in the late thirties?

R.N: I wasn't here in the thirties.

M.N: You mentioned you were in a beauty contest up at Erie Beach, did you win anything?

R.N: No I did not, only a reprimand from my Aunt Martha, when she saw the picture in the paper.

M.N: What was the reprimand for?

R.N: Oh appearing in public in a bathing suit, this was 1928, I was 13 years old, but well developed for 13, I must say.

M.N: You notice a strong moral change?

R.N: Oh,unbelievable.

M.N: Do you think its for the better?

R.N: No I do not.

M.N: In what way?

R.N: Oh, there used to be some common decency, now immorality is flaunted, I think its ridiculous.

M.N: What would you say to the future generations, your decendants, that may be living in this area, hundreds of years from now?

R.N: Have a good time, as much as you can, and don't hurt anybody, thats the best advice- after all these years, I've lived long enough to realize that- life goes by very quickly- don't ever hurt anyone.

M.N: Thats very good,with the technology we have today your decendants will have a chance to listen to that.

M.N: So basicaly you have enjoyed living in the town?

R.N: Oh yes, I love it here.

M.N: Do you think that will be lost as this growth keeps going, the small town effect?

R.N: No not nessecarly, they seem to be getting away from cities, I know all my sisters and brothers moved away from Buffalo. You want a little room a little fresh air, I think you feel a little safer in a small town then you do in a city.

M.N: Do you think your taxes are to high?

R.N: Oh yes, indeed I do, the water rates are out rageous.

M.N: Do you think thats because of the expanding beaucracy in government?

R.N: Yes, there giving them to much power, its coming more and more out of the hands of the people and into the hands of the few, the more we pay for water the worse it seems to get, the water is foul and not fit to drink.

M.N: So you feel your not being reprsented in your local government?

R.N: Not truly, no.

M.N: Thank you Mrs. Near for the interview, anything else to say?

R.N: No I can't think of anything.