

Michael Near interviewing Mrs. Avis Benner, at her home at 2530 Bowen Rd.

**M.N:** Avis, were you born in the Fort Erie area ?

**A.B:** Yes, it was the Bertie Township then though.

**M.N:** And that was right on the Bowen Rd. at home ?

**A.B:** Right on Bowen Rd. at home.

**M.N:** That was a farm ?

**A.B:** A farm, it was just a acre of land the farm was on another road.  
Just an acre there, the farm.

**M.N:** Your Mom and Dad had been out there for a while though, hadn't they ?

**A.B:** Yes.

**M.N:** Had they come from this area ?

**A.B:** Yes, Mother was from right on Ridgemount, just a little ways from our place, in fact were I was born that land belonged to my Grandmother and gave it to Mom and Dad when they were married and they built a house there.

**M.N:** Both sides of your family go back into the ...., quite aways into Fort Erie history.

**A.B:** Yes, my Father was from the Garrison Rd. area. His home was on the Garrison Rd.

**M.N:** Did you notice a big difference from living say on a farm then living actualy living in town?

**A.B:** I didn't like it in town.

**M.N:** Why was that ?

**A.B:** I only lived there about a year, and then we moved out to Cresent, after we was married, but I didn't like it in town.

**A.B:** And now I'm back on the farm.

**M.N:** When did you notice the biggest difference from now, say from living on the farm from when you were a girl and now ?

**A.B:** Oh, it was all horses when I was a girl and now it's tractors and big machinery and even the milking parlours, milking, it's all different, but it's still work.

**M.N:** Did your dad use horses?

**A.B:** He did all his work with horses.

**M.N:** Did he ever have a tractor?

**A.B:** Just towards the last, but it was all he did it, then my brothers took over and then they got the bailers and combines. He did this with horses.

**M.N:** What time period would that be, when he shifted to the tractor ?

**A.B:** I don't know. I was trying to think. It was in the late forties, in the forties.

**M.N:** Was the conditions alot tougher then, do you believe - economically ?

**A.B:** Oh, maybe on the farm, it all depends on the farming your in now the last few years crop farming has been bad but then the milking you have the cows, the dairy herds, why if you have that, that's better, you get a lot more for that, the milk that part is a lot better.

**M.N:** The farms were alot smaller then ?

**A.B:** Yes, they cover more acres now, they cover more acres and they have more cows. They don't milk by hand then we- they milked by hand. They was just getting the milkers in, at first they just by hand.

**M.N:** Was there more farmers then ?

**A.B:** More that actually farmed around all the land around here was farmed, everybody farmed, now some of them they don't farm, but around this area it stayed about the same, some of it isn't.

**M.N:** Which school did you go to ?

**A.B:** Number 6, Bertie on Ridgemount Road and the school I went to was a one room school with,-it's been gone since they built the new one. I was 12 when they built the new one. I didn't go to it, I went to high school in Fort Erie but that one burnt down they closed that one down.

**M.N:** How many kids in a one room school house ?

**A.B:** Oh, anyweres from, in this one here 28-35, the teacher had the whole class, all the grades and the older ones helped the younger ones. You got your work done. If someone was having trouble, if you could do it you helped them, did work on blackboard.

**M.N:** Did you have to go to High School, were would you go, Fort Erie?

**A.B:** I went to Fort Erie then there was one continuation school in Stevensville but we had to find our own transportation and at Fort Erie had to pay for our own way there. No bussing, nothing like that.

**A.B:** They don't-we had to make our own fun and entertainment, now they want it all handed to them, if they had to shovel snow, to skate they won't skate, they want someone to do all that. There missing out on alot. When they get out they don't know how to make there own fun.

**M.N:** I'm going to skip over to work or World War 2.

**M.N:** Did you notice. What did you notice about World War 2, the effect say upon your life?

**A.B:** Well, I guess it was like any other war, you worried, you had friends and relatives that were in the services and you worried about them. You were rationed but you made due with what you could get, but you knew it was for the best.

**M.N:** How did you feel about the Germans and Japanese ?

**A.B:** They were just our enemies . There was lots of people of German descent around, we didn't bear any hard feelings towards them at all, as far as we were concerned, I was-they were-the ones we were against were the ones that were over there, not the ones that had been here. Just because there parents were German or something-it didn't- myself it didn't bother.

**M.N:** Was there some people it did bother ?

**A.B:** No, not that I know of, none that I know, there probably was , none that I know of held a grudge that way.

**M.N:** Rationing was one of the biggest factors ?

**A.B:** Rationing was one of the biggest, we didn't starve , we had plenty, you had to maybe conserve on one thing and that, but, if you had alot of it and your nieghbours didn;t, you just.....

**M.N:** What was the biggest thing you noticed about rationing, what was the biggest article that was short?

**A.B:** There was no article that bothered me, I wasn't actualy suffering or short of anything really one more than others. I just watched. We just watched what we had. There was only the two of us.

**M.N:** Do you think the people on the farm had a advantage over the town people in food supply ?

**A.B:** Not really, because it was like-butter or sugar that was rationed, with the sugar, why they needed, in fact they would use more, they were more inclined to do there own baking and canning, there were alot of people in town didn't do canning that they did on farms

**A.B:** so they would use more sugar then some of the people in town.  
And now-maybe the odd one then would make there own butter  
but if they had to they could, very few did.

**M.N:** Was that done in a hand churn or was there a machine to do that ?

**A.B:** Oh, you mean on the farm ?

**M.N:** Yes

**A.B:** It was a hand churn. I remember they have-you can get attach-  
ments to your electrical things. You can make butter now, but  
then it was all-when we made it.

**M.N:** Did you feel pride in the service men ? Going off to fight the  
Germans and the Japanese ?

**A.B:** Oh, yes, yes even those, there was some that was stationed around  
here at Niagara Falls, at the power station, even those-they, the  
odd time, they do some things that maybe they shouldn't, they  
get in trouble, you were still thankfull they were there to protect  
that stuff.

**M.N:** When the War ended did you notice a change in the attitude of  
the people, did things change in the Fort Erie area, say Ridgeway  
Stevensville, was there a difference between then, say before  
the war ?

**A.B:** Well, there was alot as far in this area, with the Fleet there was  
a lot more money in the area, during the war and right after, then  
what there was before but as things died down and the men came  
back why jobs were geting scarcer but no I didn't see that much  
difference, actualy a different pace pace as far as living, the  
price of things was higher and they just kept going up but that  
was-but during the war at one time wages was froze, they could'nt  
raise the wages.

**M.N:** I'll shift a little bit till after the war, the communist started making  
big expansions then, right after the war and it went through some  
hard times, like in the 50's the cold war. Was there any, what  
was the feelings about the communist ? Were the communist alien  
to this area? Did people really no what the communist were doing?  
Were they considered dangerous at that time ? During the war  
or before the war ?

**A.B:** Just what we would read more in the paper any actualy being  
here, I didn't know any of those you know any, but you read it  
in the paper or hear it on the radio you would take a dim view  
of it.

**A.B:** You wouldn't like what they were doing or what you heard but to have any that was active ones right around here I didn't know of any of those. I certainly didn't like what they were doing.

**M.N:** There was a lot of people who came into the area during the war and after the war, immigrants and things like that did that make a big change ?

**A.B:** Well, it built up in the, in what was then Fort Erie it didn't affect out where we were because it was farms where we are right now, out in Crescent where we lived, that built up but it's built up more since we left, it's really built up now, when we left there wasn't that much.

**M.N:** So you see a big difference in the Crescent Park area?

**A.B:** Now, then what there was then when we were out there, oh yes.

**M.N:** Just housing ?

**A.B:** Housing and streets have opened up that wasn't opened up but now it's all built up, there's different streets opened up that well like on our own street there was only maybe 6 houses. When we first went out there was 3 on our side. When we left some of it had built up, it started to build up but now it's all built up. And the farm that Ernie's father had on the corner, it's not there any more, it's all sub-division and all that. The ground here the farming area it hasn't built up well, right now you can't build on a farm land, they won't let you severance, you have to severance a lot.

**M.N:** That's the Green Belt Law isn't it ?

**A.B:** I don't know what it is, it's for agriculture even now, one time it was 25 acres but you don't need that now but you can't severance if it's farming, it's an awful job, even if it's just a lot to build on yourself.

**M.N:** How does that work ?

**A.B:** They just won't let you severance it.

**M.N:** How does that compare with years ago when the family would break off a lot, do you agree with that ?

**A.B:** I think if you own your farm and I want to give my son or daughter a lot to build on you should be able to do it.

**M.N:** The Regional Government that's taken over the Niagara Peninsula do you notice a big difference in the attitude of the way you lived back in the forties when there was a lot smaller population and you knew a lot more people and now it seems you have lost touch with local government ?

**A.B:** Oh, the local government is altogether different, you have lost touch. You go to them - you've got to go to someone else and then up higher, they don't seem to have much authority, it's more regional, its regional only time you want to do anything, a permit to do this, a permit to do that or any other thing.

**M.N:** People have mentioned to me, for example when Herb Guess was Mayor you could go to him more personally and he would listen to your problems and you could deal more effectifly on a more personal level then you could now. Do you think thats true ?

**A.B:** You can go to them now but I don't think they listen and to do anything like they used to and of course we notice the difference when it all became Fort Erie- like here-Bertie Township, now it seems everything goes that way. They don't- it isn't equalized. As far as I'm concerned they want you to be Fort Erie but yet your classed as Ridgeway or Crystal Beach when it comes to your mail if you put Fort Erie on your mail they won't deliver, although you are in Fort Erie because when I was on court duty I told them - what about living- the address was Stevensville but it was all Fort Erie and they put it Fort Erie. As far as they were concerned it was all Fort Erie.

**M.N:** Did you, when you were agirl living out in this area, did you consider your-self separte from Fort Erie , it was another town, you would visit, you didn't consider your-self part of that.

**A.B:** No, we wasn't part of Fort Erie, even when we went from here to High School you weren't part of Fort Erie you were Bertie Town-ship but you went to the Fort Erie High School.

**M.N:** Do you remember Bridgeburg?

**A.B:** It was Bridgeburg when I went to High School. It wasn't Fort Erie High School it was Bridgeburg High School.

**M.N:** Bridgeburg High School ?

**A.B:** Bridgeburg.

**M.N:** There was other sections of town at that time?

**A.B:** Amigari and Fort Erie

**M.N:** At that time what would you say was Fort Erie if I asked you at that time ?

**A.B:** The South End you would just class as Fort Erie, this end was Bridgeburg.

**M.N:** You must have used the ferry?



**A.B:** Oh, yes.

**M.N:** How much was it on the ferry ?

**A.B:** To go across to Buffalo ? It has been so long ago I forget, it wasn't much.

**M.N:** Was it a good ride ?

**A.B:** It was a good ride if you didn't get seasick.

**M.N:** Is that right, could it be rough at times ?

**A.B:** Oh, yes.

**M.N:** What did they do in the winter time when the ice was in the river ?

**A.B:** You went across on the dummy.

**M.N:** Oh is that right, they had a passenger service?

**A.B:** Yes you didn't have to go to Buffalo-you could go by train over to Black Rock. You could go by dummy or by the boat.

**M.N:** Did you notice a big difference when the Peace Bridge was built ?

**A.B:** Oh, yes, traffic, and of course-you had to-when the boat was going they were lined up to go back on Sundays and sometimes on Saturday. We had a lot of Americans coming over even then and they were lined up to go back you had to be there or wait for the next ferry to come. When the Peace Bridge opened you didn't have that. When the Peace Bridge opened you didn't have that, eventually the boat quit it didn't go anymore.

**M.N:** At that time what was your impression of the South End was it a nice section, was there a lot taverns down there then ?

**A.B:** We didn't go to the South End much, the main shopping area was the North End and that's where we went.

**M.N:** That would have been classified as Bridgeburg ?

**A.B:** Bridgeburg.

**M.N:** So Jarvis St. was more a commercial area where you went for groceries or food stuffs ?

**A.B:** It was all stores, different stores - now what it was like early, when I was small we did all our shopping in Stevensville. We didn't shop too much in Fort Erie mainly because it was hard to get to, we didn't have a car when I was small, really small and we used to do our shopping in Stevensville and we still continue, we did our banking and groceries.

**M.N:** What was available in Stevensville, a general store ?

**A.B:** Two general stores, one had dry goods in it, groceries, the other one had shoes and you could get almost anything, there was a hardware store and a hotel and two barbershops and a implement shop, a shoe store.

**M.N:** Was Stevensville bigger, then it is now ?

**A.B:** It was just the main street and a, we used to say one railroad crossing to the other, if you cross one or the other you were out of the main part of Stevensville, there was a main street there and the main street - the one store was on main street they call it Main Street now but the Post Office was on what is called Stevensville Road now.

**M.N:** How often would you go to Stevensville to shop ?

**A.B:** Oh, we'd go on Saturday night.

**M.N:** Saturday night ?

**A.B:** We went Saturday night that was people would meet and visit the men would go to the barber shop, and have a good visit, a shave, if they needed a haircut they get that, get the groceries then we would head for home.

**M.N:** Would this be a outing in a sense ?

**A.B:** Yes that would be an outing, in the winter maybe we did;nt the men would go and get the groceries, if it was nasty we wouldn't go and get -that was our outing.

**M.N:** And that would be people from this area ?

**A.B:** It would be this area and up the other - like, this side of Stevensville up towards Welland, they would come and do there shopping.

**M.N:** I noticed just down on the corner of Bowen and Ridgemount theres a quarry, has htat quarry been there a long time? Thats Walkers quarry I believe.

**A.B:** Its Walkers now then it was - belonged to the - its been there a long time , it belonged to Bertie Township and my Dad ran it for a while.

**M.N:** Oh, did he really ?

**A.B:** And then.....

**M.N:** That would be Charles Spear ?

**A.B:** Senior.

**A.B:** Yes, he ran that for awhile.

**M.N:** Would they supply stone for roadways ?

**A.B:** For the roads around here, they crush the stone and they started up when Cresent Park started up.



**A.B:** They supplied stone for up in there, when it first started and all these Township roads and repair-the quarry- they got stone from there, different ones, the teamsters.

**M.N:** Horse and wagon ?

**A.B:** Yes, horse and wagon. Thats how they-then they went to trucks.

**M.N:** Then Walkers bought them out ?

**A.B:** Plyly, had that one, no, he went up farther, Campbells bought it and then Walkers bought it from him.

**M.N:** So that was a small industry for the area ?

**A.B:** Yes, well thats, well theres, when I was small it was one-it wasn't a small industry it was the only one around except for farming, right close here, there was a lot of teams at that time.

**M.N:** At this time, I know this was an influence, did you have a radio ?

**A.B:** Yes, we had a radio, the first radio we had, had those horns, like on a Victrola.

**M.N:** Gramophone ?

**A.B:** And that was, oh maybe sixty years ago.

**M.N:** Did that become i important source say as important as the T.V. is to us now ?

**A.B:** Oh, yes but you didn't get that much on it, we'd get news and that. There be programs on you'd listen for .

**M.N:** Did you have favorite programs ?

**A.B:** Then it was Maggie and Jiggs, that goes a long way back, that was one they used to like, thats what I say there wasn't a lot of stations on but a....

**M.N:** Were did you get most of the stations from, Buffalo ?

**A.B:** Yes, thats- I think it would be I was to young to remember that, it was just this thing that music came out of and peoples voices came out of and thats what....

**M.N:** When the radio became accepted, like the television we have now did you look for certain programs ?

**A.B:** Oh yes, and especialy hockey games, Saturday hockey games that was it, but then the radios started to get more stations like you can now, there would be certain programs and now they have soap-operas that are on television then they was on radio.

**M.N:** Oh, really ?

**A.B:** You followed them, of course I was older then certain times of the day they were on radio just like on T.V.. In fact when they first started on T.V. it was some of the soap operas that you would have on radio

**M.N:** Theres men like Milton Berle and Red Skelton they carried over from radio into television is it basically the same thing, they just sort of shifted?

**A.B:** Yes.

**M.N:** Do you remember getting your first television?

**A.B:** I think we was on Orchard Ave. Ellen was small, about forty years ago. It was a small one, the cabinet was wook, and it was heavy but we got a real clear picture, and R.C.A.

**M.N:** How many stations could you get?

**A.B:** Then it was your Buffalo stations. You had to have a special areial to get the Toronto stations, it was mainly Buffalo stations.

**M.N:** Do you think with our increasing communications, television and satellites do you think its better now, do you think we have a better understanding of what's going on in the outer world than we did before?

**A.B:** Oh yes, you get news from the other countries and that you didn't before - that part - you get more from the newspaper than what you used to, it was more local news, like here, you get more news with the television and the radio.

**M.N:** I'm going to jump again, inthe early 30's when Prohibition was going strong in the U.S. did you remember about that time in this area, was it an effect on the area?

**A.B:** Not that I know in this area, not that I know personally.

**M.N:** I mentioned it because Fort Erie has a strong connection with that time?

**A.B:** Fort Erie that its self out here in Bertie Township, I didn't come in contact with that and I know there was a lot of it in Fort Erie but where and all who were involved I don't know, it didn't effect me because, we weren't used to it at home.

**M.N:** This is a quiet area?

**A.B:** Well I wouldn't say it was that, at home we didn't - we made our own fun, we had house dances and card parties, we played cards you went out.

**M.N:** You stuck pretty close to this area? HOf often would you go out?

**A.B:** You mean how often would we have dances?

**A.B:** If you wanted to you could go to a dance or a card party every week.

**M.N:** Were would they hold them ?

**A.B:** They would hold them, like the dances they would hold in the homes, the same with the card parties in different homes, from home to home, right here in Stevensville they had a hall that they would hold dances, it was above Spear's garage, Spears garage is still there but they don't use the hall. There was two halls the other one they called Litchenbergers hall, if they wanted to put on a play or anything big they would go there. They used to put on plays like they do now. The church groups would put on suppers, there was quite a few suppers they would put on, Church groups would put on suppers to raise money.

**M.N:** What kind of music was popular ?

**A.B:** Oh, square dance.

**M.N:** That was a popular style ?

**A.B:** When I was young it was square dancing.

**M.N:** When the big bands came in did you notice that change in the music was that a popular music ?

**A.B:** Well then the square dance music in the homes-people started to go to other places and you didn't have the square dances, you don't have them now like they did in the homes, when I was small thats were they held them, and of course in the summer we used to go to Crystal Beach thats were we would hear the big bands. The dance floor was really popular.

**M.N:** What was Crystal Beach like then ?  
Was it nice ?

**A.B:** Oh yes, you could go and spend all day there, just walking around we used to go at nights when the bands were there, just to listen to them, you didn't have to pay to go to watch the bands, and they would have different bands you would go and watch them they used to come over from the States on the boat, the boat docked up there.

**M.N:** Would that be the Canadiana ?

**A.B:** Yes, and they come across, it was a big thing to watch the boat come in and Erie Beach , we used to go to Erie Beach quite a bit. and then it hasn't been going for quite a while.

**M.N:** Were you at Erie Beach when it was operating ?

**A.B:** Yes, we used to go to Eire Beach more than Crystal Beach, Crystal Beach was something special, when I was a youngster

**M.N:** Could you tell me something about Erie Beach ?  
What I would know as the old Dance Hall.

**A.B:** Well thats it I was smaller and wasn't interested in the dance hall but just in the rides, we would hold our picnics there.

**M.N:** They had rides at Erie Beach? What kind of rides did they have ?

**A.B:** All the ones they had at Crystal Beach, in fact they had a old mill there before - you went down a hill into water and then they had-not as big as the Cyclone at Crystal Beach they had one that was a little smaller then that, the turns were sharper I was never on it, I could be wrong but I think it was there before the Cyclone.

**M.N:** When you were little and went to Erie Beach what interested you most ?

**A.B:** The rides and the people and the swings ?

**M.N:** Was there a lot people ?

**A.B:** Oh yes, you had to be there to get your table early, there was a lot of people from Fort Erie and that would go to Erie Beach, they were close to Erie Beach thats around here we went there more than Crystal Beach.

**M.N:** Was the grounds kept well ?

**A.B:** As far as I remember, I wasn't really interested in the grounds, I wanted the rides and the swings and that, we always had a lot of fun at Erie Beach, you see I was older and remember the bands at the dance hall- I remember more about Crystal Beach because I was older when we went there.

**M.N:** We have heard that Erie Beach had its own little train of some sort that used to take people out along - say from the ferry out to- do you remember that ?

**A.B:** I remember it but I was never on it. But thats how they would go from Fort Erie to Erie Beach or I imagine they could come across on the boat.

**M.N:** Did this railroad run right along the river or did it cut through the parkway?

- A.B:** I don't remember that part, it was more in the Fort Erie part, I don't remember that part.
- M.N:** Was there big crowds at Erie Beach ?
- A.B:** There was big crowds, just like Crystal Beach now, or when Crystal Beach was busy you had to wait for the rides.
- M.N:** What happened at Erie Beach?
- A.B:** I don't know, I don't even know who owned it , I don't know what happened.
- M.N:** Did the depression have a big affect on this area ?
- A.B:** I imagine it did like every were else , money was tight, you scrimped I never went hungry or cold.
- M.N:** There was quite a few people in Fort Erie in that situation, were it was hard times?
- A.B:** Thats were-I don't know much about then, as I say we were out here from hearing there was a lot, there was some in that Depression that lost there homes, in what is known as Fort Eire , but , I was on the farm then - it was hard, you didn't have money to throw around, you made do .
- M.N:** During the great Depression in the United States many farmers lost there land and it was pretty tough for them, was there an effect like that around here, did anybody loose there farms, or land?
- A.B:** Not that I know ofbecause I think they was - right around were I lived they all owned there own farms, they were handed down to Father and son, it wasn't as if they had just gone out and bought them.
- M.N:** This area most of the farmers in this area are familys that have been here for awhile or knew the familys that had been here for awhile or are related to the familys do you think that had an effect the close contact?
- A.B:** They, around here the farmers would help with the work or thrashing they all worked together , they helped one another in the harvesting and if they needed help , they would help them, I think it was more like that in Town your nieghbour - now in some places tyey don't even know there nieghbours.
- M.N:** Food supplies, you didn't have the refrigeration , how did you keep your meat ?

**A.B:** There was a butcher that used to be out in the country, a butcher that used to come around every week and you would buy your meat. or you could go to town, there was one who came around to the houses and thats how we would do it , buy it for the week, you would have your own chickens and your pigs for the sauges and then you salted some.

**M.N:** There was far more work involved in keeping your food supply ?

**A.B:** Oh yes, now you can take - you have freezers, you can freeze it but then you couldn't.

**M.N:** Do you think the food was better then say then it is now?

**A.B:** Its fresher.

**M.N:** Do you think you have more choice then you did then?

**A.B:** Oh yes,

**M.N:** In what ?

**A.B:** In everything you got more choice - you mean in foods- theres more variety in friuts, there fruit and vegetables , then you didn't have the vegeatables in the winter, tyeres more packaged foods of different kinds, I'm not saying how good they are for you.

**M.N:** Because of the chemicals they have now ?

**A.B:** The chemicals and the sprays, thats it some of them , the apples you buy in a store now don't taste like the apples you would get off a tree.