

This is Michael Near interviewing Mr. Ross Valvo, at the Fort Erie Public Library, it is May 28/85.

M.N: Mr. Valvo where were you born?

R.V: I was born in a place that used to be called Bridgeburg, now Fort Erie.

M.N: That was the old north end of Fort Erie?

R.V: The north end of Fort Erie, I was born in 1916, and a... right on Jarvis St..

M.N: You mentioned your Dad, was your Dad from Fort Erie?

R.V: No, my Dad came from Italy, and was one of the first Italian families to settle in, what is now Fort Erie but used to be Bridgeburg, he arrived with his 3 brothers, here in Fort Erie, he stayed in Fort Erie, the others went over to Buffalo.

M.N: You grew up in the north end, in Bridgeburg?

R.V: Yes, born and raised there and never left.

M.N: You went to school?

R.V: Went to school, Rose Seaton, used to be called Phipp Street at one time and from there to the Fort Erie High School and then to the University of Buffalo and took a small business course over there.

M.N: There must be a awful lot of changes since you were a boy?

R.V: Oh yes, Jarvis Street was a mud street, in fact Jarvis St. was one of the nicest streets in the town of Fort Erie, all the stores were there, next door to me was Briggs, the only gas station in town it was on Jarvis St., two old gas pumps there, Imperial Oil was in fact the name of it and Jarvis St. was lined with Maple trees, right from top to bottom, they cut them all down and now there starting to grow something back again, they look like trees but I don't know what they are.

M.N: Do you remember any of the other stores that were down on Jarvis?

R.V: John T. James which was a dry goods store, across from my Dad, on the corner... and Mr. Baker who had a confectionery store, sold papers and candy, R. A. Land up the street where the treasury department is in Fort Erie, he was a pharmacist, and down the street was Atwoods, Yeo's, Bitcher the old hardware store and Milik had the grocery store and food store... who else was down there, there was a Chinese Restaurant down there to, a great big hill ... there was a hill at the bottom of the street and all the kids would go down there with their sleds, there was no stores down there then, oh I'd say down from ... where the Bingo Hall is now, there was no stores down that side.

R.V: It was just empty spaces.

M.N: What would you do as a kid for entertainment?

R.V: We made our own entertainment, as kids in the winter time, we would go down there with our slieghs and out door rinks were common, I think we had more severe winters then, then we do now, because when you built a rink in those days, it seemed to last for the whole winter, now it doesn't, and as I say we made our own fun, the kids got together, played cards and visited nieghbours.

M.N: You must have gone to the old Belard Theatre then?

R.V: It was right behind our place on Dufferin St. the Bellard.

M.N: You must have know Ernie Benner then?

R.V: Ernie Benner, very well.

M.N: I had a interview with him and...

R.V: Ernie was my nieghbour and the Sherks were are nieghbour behind, J. Sherk was a carpenter, moved to Ridgeway with his family.

M.N: Would you remember Dr. Douglas, would you?

R.V: No he was in the south end, I remember Dr. Douglas, but he was in the south end of town, Dr. Mikon was in the north end and Dr. Collins.

M.N: Ross, would you consider Fort Erie, the south end, as a seperate town?

R.V: Yes, it actually was a seperate town.

M.N: Which would have been bigger, Bridgeburg or Fort Erie at that time?

R.V: I would say, you see they had the west end too, Amagari, and once upon a time it was called Victoria, it was like three little communities, I can remember when they joined, a big celebration right in front of our store, they had a ... they made a big building out of wood and set it on fire, that was the end of Bridgeburg and all became Fort Erie.

M.N: Who was the mayor then?

R.V: I think Dr. Mikon was the first mayor... not when they amalgamated, I'm sorry I can't remember... was it Holly, I'm pretty sure it was Holly as the first mayor.

M.N: Do you remember the ferry that used to come across?

R.V: Two ferrys that came across, thats how we traveled to Buffalo, mostly to see our relatives that lived over there on the west side of Buffalo, my Mothers and Fathers family lived on the west side,

R.V: There brothers and sisters and my Grandfather was over there too and a... there was two ferry boats, that traveled in the summer, in the winter time they didn't travel after the first ice came down, you wondered if you were going to make it or not, because one time they didn't, the boat went down and floated all the ways to the International and then they had the Dummy, it was a little train, we traveled over on that, that 4nded up in Black Rock and we had relatives over in that area, so we used to go across on the Dummy.

M.N: Well the Peace Bridge must have made a big difference?

R.V: Well the Peace Bridge was the death knell of the ferry, when the Peace Bridge was completed the ferry only ran for a year after that.

M.N: When you were a young man did you ever get a chance to get up to Erie Beach?

R.V: Yes, I rode the old Erie Beach ... what did they call that... they had a name for that train.

M.N: Sand Fly?

R.V: The Sand Fly train, they would go from the ferry dock, just south of the ferry dock and it was right around where Charlie Sullivan sold fish and chips stand use to be and it ran all the way along the lake up to Erie Beach.

M.N: Did they charge anything for the ride?

R.V: I think there was a small fee, I know there was a fee on the ferry and also on the Dummy but it wasn't very great we had a bus service too, old Peachy was the bus driver, it stopped right on Central Ave. and Jarvis St., on the corner was Mike Purpura, he was also one of the original that landed in Fort Erie, Purpuras, Passero, and the Valvos were the first Italian familys in Fort Erie and Mike Purpura used to be a barber on the corner and there used to be his Dad, old John Purpura, we used to call him John Banana, him and my Dad, I've got a picture of them, my Dad played the guitar and both of them had beautiful voices, they used to get the guitar and sit out front and sing, they would sing old Italian songs, the reason they called him John Banana was he had a little cart he used to push around selling banana's, he get banana's and go from house to house selling them.

M.N: The horse and wagon was a lot more common then?

R.V: Yes, it was all horse and wagon, I remember my Dad when he bought his first car and got it in the drive way and we had a barn in the back which was the garage, and he went to put it in the garage and he ended out side, through the back and into the back alley, and that was the end of his driving days.

M.N: Getting back to Erie Beach, do you remember anything about the beach when it was open?

R.V: Yes, its very similar to Crystal Beach, they had the roller coaster there, picnic benches, and stands for people, they had the dance hall, I like to dance and they had a big dance hall there, in fact the foundation is still there, they just tore it down recently, they had a big swimming pool out there.

M.N: Then you must remember Crystal Beach then?

R.V: Yes, very well.

M.N: Did you see any good groups out there?

R.V: Yes I did, in my younger days and danced to them too, the name of the band I can't ... there was a couple up there we went to, in fact I was courting my wife then, we used to go up there dancing.

M.N: It was a nice place?

R.V: It was beautiful place, I used to have a in there, you bought tickets for a nickel, I worked at the Beach for one summer, Crystal Beach so I had a in, I'd turn the ticket, I'd only buy one ticket all night, I knew the guy and he wouldn't take the ticket so it would last me all night that was one of the best dance floors around, it was a beautiful dance floor, it was just like floating on air when you were dancing. Yes, Crystal Beach was quite a spot, but thats the only thing I went up there for, I worked there in a resturant as you went into the Beach.

M.N: So you remember the old Canadiana?

R.V: Yes, I rode on her, we used to drive over to Buffalo leave our car there, go over on the Canadiana, dance on the way over, go to the dance hall, never took any rides in, we would dance and that was it, get back on the Canadiana and then drove home.

M.N: The Canadiana had bands too?

R.V: They had some name bands on it.

M.N: Oh really, I didn't realize, I thought they might have a small band.

R.V: No they had some good bands on her and I'm sure they were name bands.

- M.N:** I've heard about the midnight cruises...
- R.V:** I didn't go on any of those, I think it was Ted Warring, was it Ted Warring played Crystal Beach one year.
- M.N:** Back in Fort Erie, what we call Fort Erie now, there was just the race track, pretty well wasn't there for entertainment.
- R.V:** The Race Track and the Rail Road were everybody worked, in the summer time at the track, a lot of us young fellows worked up there, but the rail road was a going concern.
- M.N:** Fort Erie was actually a rail road town.
- R.V:** My Dad used to be a shoe maker, he made shoes and he repaired them and a ... a lot of rail road guys would come in and get there shoes fixed, he also made shoes for a couple of cripple people who where in the town of Fort Erie, he made shoes for them, but they had to have certain shoes, actually his trade was a shoe maker.
- M.N:** What did you think of the ... when they amalgamated Fort Erie, was that considered a good deal, did the north end resent it or the south end resent it?
- R.V:** There was a little, a little friction there, but I don't think there was any resentment as you would call it, everyone was happy when it did happen, you could see it coming and it was going to happen well it showed when they had the big display on the corner of Jarvis and Central, where my Dad had a store, they burnt the old town of Fort Erie, it was quite a celebration that night, so I think people them selves where really happy that it happened.
- M.N:** How did the police force work then?
- R.V:** Well they became one police force, there was two police forces, there was two seperate areas, there was a fire department at the south end and at the north end, one was called Bridgeburg and the other Fort Erie, but now there named or what ever, number 1 or 2 what ever and I think they covered the areas good, the police department and I'm pretty sure they where happy that it all became one, they had the one police department down there, I think it was on Queen St. and that was where the town hall was and there was one on Jarvis St..
- M.N:** In the south end, would that have been Andy Griffin?
- R.V:** Andy Griffin was the chief once and Carter was chief, he was before Andy and Ketch was after Carter and then Chirp Matthews.
- M.N:** Lets go to another phase of Fort Erie history, do you remember anything about the days of prohibition or boot legging?

R.V: Yes I do, I certainly do, my brother who is now passed away, drove one of the boats over one night and every so often they would raid the docks down on the bottom of Dufferin St., between Dufferin, Phipp and Jarvis, was all the docks down there and I was quite a swimmer at that time and a ... of course they would throw the booze over board and this one day I took my wagon down there and a burlap bag and I came home with a burlap bag full of Scotch Whiskey, my Dad took one look and he said " I think I know where you got that" I said "Pa,you know where I got it its all yours".

M.N: That must have been quite a time?

R.V: Old Russel Smith, he passed away, he was quite a swimmer, he'd go out there nearly every day and he'd swim under water and come up with a bottle, he'd come up with half a dozen bottles nearly every day, he'd swim under water and come up with the bottles, it was good Scotch Whiskey.

M.N: That would have been very expensive at that time?

R.V: Prohibition days, it sure was.

M.N: I didn't realize there was that much activity down there?

R.V: There was quite a bit of activity down there, docks down there had all kinds of boats, down along Jarvis and Dufferin.

M.N: Was there any kind of police control over it?

R.V: No they would get a complaint and they would go and raid them every body would throw everything over board and the police would to and that was it, thats all there was to it, they would really load a boat up and away they would go over to the American side, I never did go over on the boats, my older brother did.

M.N: And they would just unload on the other side?

R.V: Unload on the other side and bring the boats back.

M.N: So that must have injected some money into the community, at a tough time?

R.V: It injected some money into my brother's pocket.

M.N: We have had a tough time finding out about that period, because so many of the old guys are gone and they didn't leave a record.

R.V: They wouldn't leave a record of that, thats for sure, but I do remember when they paved Jarvis St. too , they ran the sewer down Jarvis, the first sewer was on Jarvis St., they had to blast because of all the rock and this one day they blasted and they didn't have enough cover on and a big rock came through my Dad's front window.

R.V: They paid for it but there was a lot of commotion, they had to board it all up.

M.N: Okay, we will carry on ... the great depression, you must remember that in town, it must have been pretty hard on the area?

R.V: Yes, we went through the depression but we also had ... my Dad was n't getting much money repairing shoes, I can still remember the rail road men coming in and giving my Dad a watch, a rail road watch, would you hold that till I get some money, get my shoes fixed, the guy would bring in some money my Dad would give him back the rail road watch. He had a lot of watches in the till.

M.N: Do you think because every one was in the same boat made it a little better?

R.V: I think so, things where rough, but we got by.

M.N: World War 2 must have helped bring the town out of ...?

R.V: Oh it did, Fleet was starting to go then, they where making the Fleet trainer then and a few other parts for the bombers, people came flocking into Fleet aircraft and they where making stuff for the war, they built that ladies hostel over there where Our Lady of Victory School is now, there was a lot of work in Fort Erie so things did prosper.

M.N: That was called Winston Hall wasn't it?

R.V: Winston Hall.

M.N: Was Horton Steel going strong before the war?

R.V: It would go in phases, they where busy and then as soon as winter came along you'd get laid off and you where off for the winter and soon as spring started you go back into work because I worked there for 3 years, thats what happened to me, I started to work there in 36,37, and every winter I got laid off untill 1939 I went to work for the gas company. So the war was in the 40's so things where going pretty good.

M.N: After the war alot more people started coming into town, did you notice a big change, did the town start to grow?

R.V: The town started to grow, when did regional government come in?

M.N: Ten years ago?

R.V: The town did grow for a little while, then it stopped, I don't think it was going that great and now it could start again, I'm sure that it will, I'm pretty sure once that new plant gets built up there at Fleet you'll see a change, you'll see the town grow.

M.N: Different mayors in town... from interviewing different people they seem to find some mayors where better than others, Jack Teal seems to stand out, a good mayor, does anyone stand out for you.

R.V: Jack Teal. Well of course where the same age, you get him an interview.

M.N: Yes, where thinking of it.

R.V: Jack and I have been friends for years and he definitely set out, he was for the people and I think he did good for the town, more so then any mayor I know of course as I say the first mayors I was young and not interested in politics more sports minded.

M.N: Then men like Herb Guess who where more on personality than actions I gather. What do you think of regional government, do you think it did well for the town?

R.V: No I don't think it did.

M.N: That seems to be a common opinion among people we've interviewed that it hasn't been a benifit.

R.V: I don't think its been a benifit to the town at all, I think its been a detriment to our town.

M.N: In what way?

R.V: Well taxes and a ... you can't get things done the way you want them done you have to beat around the bush.

M.N: People have mentioned... when the town was on its own, that you could go to town hall and talk to the mayor or talk to any body and get sort of an answer...

R.V: It was more of a family, more of a open group, you had our own town people running the town, when you get into regional you can't get to them, I think regional Niagara is more concerned with Niagara Falls and St. Catharines then they are with Fort Erie, there down there and can take care of themselves, unfortunately Niagara region governs us and we have bide by their laws and taxes and everything else.

M.N: The people we've talked too feel that way. Do you think we can ever get away from regional government?

R.V: I know a lot of places are talking about getting away from it, wether they can or not I don't know.

M.N: Do you think with growing up in the town ... you've seen the town develop in different ways, that Fort Erie should go to tourism or to industry?

R.V: Go to both.

M.N: So we can get the best of two worlds?

R.V: Correct, they should go to industry and they should go to tourism, thats my personal feelings because industry, where going to need industry in this town to make it grow and its not going to grow unless you get that industry in.

M.N: How can we do it with tourism?

R.V: Tourism is not making it grow its promoting your town, putting your town out to the people around the area, an area outside our area where people coming into the town exsposing the town and showing people what a nice little community on the Niagara river and also close to Lake Erie.

M.N: Theres been alot of talk about cleaning up Lake Erie and the Niagara...

R.V: I don't think our section is that bad, the lower part, granted yes the lower Niagara going into Lake Ontario they have most of the pollution what ever you want to call it, I don't think the top part of the Niagara River and Lake Erie is that bad.

M.N: Is there anythingin the history or the time you where brought up in Fort Erie or significant in the history of the town?

R.V: The only thing that I would say is that when it went regional I thought it was going to be great and the town was going to grow, expand, Fort Erie was going to be on the map and that didn't happen, unfortunately.

M.N: Years ago when the town was basicaly just a small town, people came for the race track or mostly passing through ... the border crossing and that, do you think the people stayed more then they do now, now they seem to zip up the Q.E.W. and thier gone,

R.V: Oh your talking about...

M.N: Before the Queenie...

R.V: The travellers and that.

M.N: Do you think the people stayed around more?

R.V: I think they did but a ... the population has grown in the areas around us and now they get off the Peace Bridge and they hit the Queenie and thier gone.

M.N: That seems to be another common complaint. Where Crystal Beach had a steady summer residence and they don't seem to have that any more.

R.V: No they don't because now you go up there now and all those summer homes are in rough shape and their vacant.

R.V: Where before they where filled.

M.N: Would people stay the summer then, would they stay the whole summer?

R.V: Alot of them did.

M.N: Would they commute?

R.V: They stayed all summer, they still do, theres a few who still commute back and forth, I have relatives own a place up on Bay Beach and they come over every summer, they own the place, they go back and forth to Buffalo.

M.N: Do you think that something like Erie Beach or Crystal Beach and its orignal idea could make a come back in this area ?

R.V: Erie Beach is gone there, Crystal Beach could and it looks like it is and it looks definitely going to be going back to Crystal Beach because there getting the Canadiana back, they hope to have it in the water and travel ing back and forth, which I do hope happens and when it does happen your going to see Crystal Beach roll again, thats my feelings anyway.

M.N: How about the race track, theres been a lot of talk about the track only being open for a few days and then they talk about closing it?

R.V: Well thats been something for some time and a I myself do not think the race track will close, in fact I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see the 3 day meet expanded, because the B meet ... I've got a feeling thier going to expand it to more then 3 days.

M.N: Which will mean more people coming into town and spending more money...

R.V: And more people working, I'd like to see it happen and I think it could happen, talking to some of the race track people, they would like to see it happen, they like the B races, they got B horses here and they don't like to take them here and down to Finger Lakes or the other B... they would like to see them longer here, more racing days.

M.N: How is the track different now and say when you where a boy, is it a lot different?

R.V: Oh yes, they never had the infield... in fact this is one of the nicest tracks in Ontario, its beautiful out there.

M.N: When you were young, did they have the racing every day then?

R.V: They had the racing every day but they only had 7 races, they had it every day and only a certain number of weeks every summer and that was it, then it was every day, Monday to Saturday.

M.N: Did they get good crowds?

R.V: They got good crowds.

M.N: Before the Peace Bridge how did the people get up there to the track?

R.V: They would take the ferry and the dummy, the train from Toronto used to pull right in along side the track, the tracks are still there, the spur is still there, that train would come in, it was a Toronto train it would pick up people all the way along, and they would wait until the train got there before the races started even if the train was late, the races were supposed to start at 1:00 o'clock and if that train hadn't arrived yet the races wouldn't start until that train got there.

M.N: Would that be up there where the G.T.R. is?

R.V: The track went right beside the G.T.R. it went right into the race track, it went right in there, a sidewalk all the way down, and the people... went into the track, the train itself, he'd unhook and turn around and come back in and then back to Toronto they'd stay all day ... a special train for the races and then there was the ferry, it brought cars, cars on the ferry, you see there was cars and passengers on that ferry.

M.N: Somebody was mentioning that on the ferry once in awhile they would have people who would play the guitar or something like that?

R.V: That's true, they would have a little get together, the guys would play guitar or somebody would play the violin, just for... on the ferry.

M.N: Somebody had mentioned it. We have found in talking about the town that the hotels seem to have an interesting part in the history of the town, the Bucket on Courtwright St., the Barnea House, the Queens was a old place, the King Eddy is a old place...

R.V: You know the Royal Hotel on the bottom of Jarvis St..

M.N: Does that go way back, would you remember any one who had owned that?

R.V: I remember the Comptons owning the Bucket.

M.N: Was that Matt and Marry Compton?

R.V: Yes and Mr. Primo owned the Grand Trunk, Mike Tartaglia wife's parents owned the Grand Trunk, thats way back.

M.N: Was that a place pretty well for rail road men to drink?

R.V: Rail road men would stop at the Grand Trunk Hotel and the races, it thrived when the races came, that was there busy time, the odd rail road guy would stay there.

M.N: I remember as a boy going down there [Barnea House] and thinking that you had to have bib overalls and a cap to get in there.

R.V: They used to go around there, where the station is today and cross over to the Barnea House, the Bucket those two.

M.N: Some people have mentioned that the Central Ave. bridge made a big change ?

R.V: Yes, it sure... it connects the two areas together, easier to get across, before you had to go across, then they stopped going across the tracks, Crook St. used to go across there.

M.N: Then the only other way was along the Blvd.?

R.V: The Blvd., yes, or you could go out by the subway, a lot of trucks couldn't get through the subway.

M.N: Do you think Jarvis Street is going to die as a commercial center?

R.V: No I don't think so.

M.N: It seems to have a up stage and then a down stage...

R.V: It does go up and down, I agree with you there.

M.N: The Mall must have an effect on it?

R.V: The Mall have had an effect on it but theres a few stores coming back to Jarvis St. of course if you get a few more fires it might die, I don't think it will.

M.N: Is there anything that you feel about the town, you would like to leave for historical sake or for your descendants, was it a good life in this town, a good town?

R.V: I've lived here all my life and my family is still here and the people here are close knit, I've heard people say that once they come into the town of Fort Erie and they get to know the people they stay, they don't leave, there must be something here thats keeping them here, I think its a ideal place to be but I do hope that there can be more industries in the town of Fort Erie and we'll make the town thrive, we need that.

M.N: Do you think where going to loose anything with the town getting bigger?

R.V: No I don't think we will, the only way we can expand is by going

R.V: west there is no sense in going south or north, thats residential west you can expand there is a lot of room for it and with this M.M.B. plant coming in it will definitely help, they got to hire people there and its going to help and I can see it might get bigger as the years go by.

M.N: Thank you Mr. Valvo.