

Diana Matthews interviewing Mr. George Hitch at his home at 301 Jarvis Street, Fort Erie. May 13th, 1985.

D.M: Hi Mr. Hitch.

G.H: Howdee-doo.

D.M: Can you tell me your full name?

G.H: George Hitch, that's all there is!

D.M: Where were you born?

G.H: In Toronto.

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

G.H: I came here in 1950, so that would be 35 years.

D.M: Why did you come to Fort Erie?

G.H: I bid myself in here. I worked in Bellville for years, then I worked in Toronto and I come over here to work out of here.

D.M: How old were you when you moved here?

G.H: 50 years old.

D.M: Why did you come here, for a job?

G.H: Well, like working in the railroad, you can bid yourself anyplace you want to go, and in fact, I've been around the district 4 times. I worked out of Sarnia, I worked out of Niagara Falls, Stratford and Bellville. I done most of my firing in Bellville and when I was set up there, I came to Toronto, came back to Toronto. From then I went to Sarnia for a while and then I got cut off in Sarnia and I was gonna go back to Toronto and back to Bellville and this fella said gee, why don't you go to Fort Erie? So I said oh, Fort Erie is the end of the line! He said there's lots of jobs there, he said there's alot of younger men holding good jobs down there. So I thought well, I'll go down there, so I come down here and I stood for about 5 jobs here. Good road jobs. So that's why I stayed. That was in 1950 and I quit in 1965, I was... I worked 15 years.

D.M: That was on the railroad?

G.H: Yeah.

D.M: What type of work did you do?

G.H: Engineer.

D.M: So you ran the trains?

G.H: Yeah.

D.M: Were there alot of depots in Fort Erie or was there just one?

G.H: Just the one, the C.N. was on one side and the NewYork Central was on the other side, opposite Courtwright.

D.M: That's where the Fort Erie Depot was, on Courtwright?

G.H: No, the New York Central came in off Courtwright, but the C.N. came in off Lewis Street, on the opposite side of the tracks. I liked it here, good runs, long hours. You'd leave here around 6 o'clock at night or 5 o'clock at night and you'd be lucky to get in Toronto at 10 o'clock the next morning.

D.M: What did the trains carry, were they passenger trains?

G.H: No no no, just freight trains.

D.M: What type of stuff, anything?

G.H: Anything at all, yeah. We'd switch all the way from... we'd leave here and go up through Port Colborne and across through Welland and down over to Hamilton and then in to Mimico. But you'd switch all the way along and set off cars and lift cars all the way and you'd be a good 12 hours or more going over there.

D.M: What is Victoria Station?

G.H: Victoria Station was the old New York Central up here, it was up by Bowen Road. Do you remember where Maggie McGraw used to live, their farmhouse over there? Well, Victoria Station is just up from there.

D.M: What was your first impression of the town when you got here, did you like it?

G.H: Yes I did. I came in here on the train there at one o'clock, it used to come in here around one o'clock, and I went up and booked on and the fella said have you ever been down the Boulevard? I said no, I didn't know it from a load of hay. He was one of the fellows that worked on the road there and he says you're gonna like Fort Erie, and he took me for a ride down to the Falls there, and what a beautiful ride it was and I thought jeez, this is gonna be a nice place to stay. So I come back and first thing, they got me a place. At that time you could put your name in... people used to put their names into the railroad, and they'd give you the names of boardinghouses and thing like that. I went to Bill Marlett's, did you know him? Just up here on Jarvis, 346. I stayed there for a few years anyway, I stayed there. Then after that I got thinking gee whiz, I'll bid myself some other place, but I never did! I stayed right here.

D.M: When you first came here, what was Jarvis Street like, the same?

G.H: Pretty well, the A&P was where the bingo place is now and next to that was... a chinese laundry I think it was, and then there was I.O.O.F. place that sold old homes and stuff like that, but the rest

of it's practically all the same.

D.M: What about the South End, is it the same too?

G.H: Oh no, the South End. Look at all those new hotels, there's new restaurants that are built there. Along there where Happy Jack's place and that, they all used to be little small little stores there and they tore them all out of there. Happy Jack, he used to be... have a laundry on Klauck Street, that's where he started and then he sold the laundry and opened up the restaurant at the South End. He opened up a nice little place. I think it was the New York Café he opened up in the South End.

D.M: Before Happy Jacks?

G.H: Oh, yeah. Before Happy Jacks. They tore it down when they built the new building. The old man died.

D.M: Happy Jack?

G.H: Yeah, the old man died and I guess it was the sons that took over and made it what it is there now.

D.M: What did you do for entertainment when you moved here?

G.H: There was a show down at the South End and what is it now, the bowling alley now? Right there down by the... across from where Agrette's store used to be, it was a show at that time, but I never ever went to it. I used to go down to the Ohio.

D.M: What's that?

G.H: The hotel down there. It used to be the Ohio House, what do they call it now... I don't know what they call it now.

D.M: What did you do there?

G.H: Drank. Ha ha ha ha ha! Nothing else to do!!! Then we'd... Bill Marlett used to go across to Buffalo quite a bit, so I'd go across with him. He used to like go over shopping.

D.M: Were you here when they changed it to Regional Govenment?

G.H: Yes.

D.M: What did you think of that?

G.H: Well, I didn't think of it very much because here, at this time, god, you knew all the policeman and all the policeman knew everybody and it was a friendly kind of atmosphere around here. If there was any little bit of crime or anything, they knew exactly where to look, who would do it and everything else. But as soon as Regional came in, you don't know one policeman from another, and they don't know the people either as far as I know.

D.M: Do you think it helped or not?

G.H: I don't think it helped as far as the town is concerned because they knew just exactly where to go if somebody had done something, but here, now, they've got... they might send somebody from Niagara Falls or someplace and up here, you wouldn't know whether he's... where he's looking for. But I think it's... maybe it's cheaper in the long run, but I don't know, I guess it would be to amalgamate all these police forces. It would be a lot cheaper. But at that time, there used to be a policeman walk up and down Jarvis Street all day long there. You never see a policeman on Jarvis Street now.

D.M: Tell me some more about the railroads.

G.H: Well, when I first came here, it was all steam engines, in fact that was hard work as far as the fireman was concerned. The engineer wasn't too bad, but it was pretty hard work for the fireman. I'll say right today that if they still had steam engines here, you wouldn't have the employment. The young fellows wouldn't do that work now.

D.M: Would it be too hard?

G.H: It is hard work. Shovelling coal and you are on call 24 hours a day and weekends sometimes, holidays, anything. People today don't want to do that. Where would you find some young fellow that would go to work and get out and shovel his heart out all the way to Toronto and be there maybe an hour or two hours and turn around and shovel his way all the way back again. And he might only get home for 3 or 4 hours if he was on the spare board there. He'd be called out again. Like they say, times change, in fact a lot for the better.

D.M: When did they change from steam to the way engines are now?

G.H: In the 50's they started changing there. I liked the steam engines because I was brought up on them. I done all my firing on a steam engine and most of my running was on steam until they got the diesel. To run a steam engine, you had to know the road, the hills and with diesel, all you do is once you get it out... pull the throttle out, it goes! It goes uphill and it slows down and it goes downhill and it goes faster. But an old steam engine, there's places there, that if you stopped on a hill, you couldn't lift your train. Whereas a diesel will. I can't see any young fellows starting on the railroad, if they had to go back to that kind of work.

D.M: Did it create alot of employment?

G.H: Yes, it did, because they had to have engine cleaners and greasers and maintenance men and everything all the time. The fires had to be cleaned. Say you leave here and go to Toronto, or to Mimico at that time, there'd be ash pit men there, men that worked on the ash pit and fellows with grease, and every so often, every month or so they had to take them in and wash them out, clean out the boilers and all that stuff. A diesel can go from here to Vancouver and never bother, they just let them go. It saved them alot of money on labour. Diesel... they're clean, where as a steam engine, you get black just looking at them!!!

D.M: Did the people in town complain about the dirt from the steam engines?

G.H: Yes they did! In a way they did, yes. That was a way of life then. Half the people in the town burned coal, which they don't now. When they had the coal piles here at Amigari, that's about all the people burned, was C.N.R. coal from the coal piles. The elderly people, I guess alot of them remember it, but for them to go back like and say those old coal piles! That's where they got their heat from. The Canadian National, they heated alot of homes around Fort Erie. Nobody stopped them, there was no guards around or nothing, they did with it as they liked.

D.M: What killed the railroad in Fort Erie, why did everything slow down, was it not necessary?

G.H: Well, yes and no. At one time most of the cars out of Fort Erie, they come across the Peace Bridge. So the New York Central, they turned around and instead of bringing their cars over there, they went through Niagara Falls, and that more or less took away... Oh, I'll say 50% of the business went from here down... that's when New York Central had their yards here. When they took the yards away from here, that killed alot of railroad work here in Fort Erie. Then they worked... like from here they had about one time, they had oh, 9 transfers I guess, going back and forth, but then they just cut them off. All they have is a yard engine going over there now. But there's not... I'll say their still going pretty good, but not like they used to.

D.M: Did it cause alot of unemployment?

G.H: When they moved out of here? No, I can't say it did because Fort Erie had alot of older engineers and that and pretty well they went on their pension. When the New York Central was here, see, alot

their men went to St. Thomas and they moved out of here and Niagara Falls and Welland, so they were scattered around. I don't imagine there was any unemployment. But I suppose the... Canada was losing revenue coming across the bridge and that.

D.M: What does the railway haul now? When you see the train in the yard now, what are they doing?

G.H: There's alot of stuff. As I say, alot of the stuff they get here comes from the states and it's all through freight. Alot of parts and going back, there is alot of tri-level cars and that going through. But not like they used to. At one time, there used to be about 5 or 6 coal trains going out of here a day. The coal would come up from Pennsylvania up through this way, but there's no more coal trains.

D.M: Was there ever a passenger train when you were here?

G.H: The only passenger train out of here was the T.H.&B.

D.M: Where did that run?

G.H: From Toronto to Buffalo and it used to be the T.H.&B. crews from Buffalo to Hamilton and then they'd change crews there and there'd be C.P.R. crews there from Hamilton to Toronto.

D.M: Was there a station in Fort Erie?

G.H: Yeah, the New York Central station. And the only way to get out of here on the C.N.... they had a little mixed passenger train going out of here, like they had freight cars and a couple of coaches on the back and to go to Toronto on the C.N.R., you had to take it out of here to Caledonia and transfer at Caledonia on another way freight there into Hamilton, that was the only way you could get out of here by C.N. Other than that, you'd have to drive down to the Falls and go.

D.M: So people took the T.H.&B.?

G.H: Yeah.

D.M: Do you remember how much it cost to get to Toronto then?

G.H: I don't know. I had my long service pass, so I could ride on that. I never ever did pay. But they had a... out of here they had a morning train and a noon train and an evening train going to Toronto and the same coming back, 3 trains each way. They just cut them right off.

D.M: Why?

G.H: I never did find out why they cut them off. Possibly a drop in the passengers and that. The busses would be quicker. You see, as far

as your bus is concerned, they could come down No. 8 highway and stop right in the towns, Grimsby and Beamsville and all those.

D.M: The trains didn't stop in places like that?

G.H: They could stop, but they would be out of town, the busses go right in the middle of the town. Same as in St. Catherines, the station in St. Catherines is a way out of town, at that time it was anyway. I suppose St. Catherines has grown up now. At that time the station at St. Catherines was a way out. So the busses come right down the main street. When you took a train you'd have to take a taxi into town. And then the railway would come along, the first thing they start cutting different stations out. Like, there was St. Catherines, they cut the Beamsville right out. Beamsville... they'd stop at Grimsby, and that's about all they'd stop at. There was no way for people to ride the train.

D.M: Do you know any thing about the bootlegging that went on here?

G.H: Yes. There was Maggie McGaw, she used to have the farm up here on Thompson Road and that was quite a notorious place! Her daughters are still around. Maggie, she was one, and old John, he was a sectionman on the New York Central. They had a big farm there and gee, you could go there and buy all kinds of corn or vegetables and all that, then you'd go in and drink beer in their place there. There was always a card game ongoing all the time. But next to the Y.M.C.A. on Lewis Street was Emma Griffi. Have you heard of the Griffi's here? She was a bootlegger here for years and years and years. And she'd get raided, but there would be nobody there! She was here for, oh,... Well, even before I moved here in '50, that was in the forties, she was bootlegging way back in the forties. She done it all her life, and fellows would come in, when I worked out of Toronto there, we'd come over and nobody would walk downtown for a beer, they would just go in to Emma's. 3 doors up from there was when Matt Compton sold his hotel, they bought that house up there, but they never stopped bootlegging, they were still bootlegging there and Mary Compton, they lived on the corner of that little street there, the men on the night shift or the afternoon shift, when they come down, they'd always stop at Compton's and have a few beers on the way home. A funny little incident there one day, I come over from Mimico and I went in to have a couple of beers and she said... it was about 9 o'clock at night I guess, and she said George, you better drink your beer and take a couple of

bottles of beer with you and go on the verandah because they will be here in about another half an hour. They knew when the police was coming. So I said okay and I took my couple of pints of beer and away I went. I sat on the verandah at the old Y.M.C.A. there and watched them and they drove up there and they went in and they were in about 10 or 15 minutes and they come out and drove away. There was nobody in there 'cause she would tell them to go and give them a pint of beer or something like that. When that woman died, when Mary Compton died, she had one of the biggest funerals here in Fort Erie. Even the minister that gave the sermon and that... the Chief of Police was there and the Mayor and old Herb Guess, did you ever hear of him? He was there and all the dignitaries of the town went to her funeral and it come out... the minister there, he had a big long list there of stuff and he said that he was awful sorry that he didn't have the priveledge of meeting her, that she was such a marvelous woman. The Chief of Police got up there and he give a little story there, Chirp Matthews was the Chief of Police then, and he gave a little saying there. She kept half those people up in Skunk Hollow, the other side of the subway, in food and clothing and stuff like that and nobody ever knew any thing about it. Most of the money that she made, she put it out to the poor. That's why the Mayor was there and the Chief of Police. They all knew! She was a wonderful woman. If you didn't have the money to buy a beer, you know? She'd say, well, just mark it on the doorjamb and you'd mark it, you'd put your name and then you'd mark one pint or two pints or whatever you had you know. You never had to put an I.O.U., you would just mark it on the wall, and everybody paid up and she'd take the soap and water and wash it off and start all over again. Iv'e seen the wall, the same thing like that, and all the way down there would be marks, that she would give out and I don't think anybody ever cheated her, but she used to give food clothing and everything to the poor. She was better that the town's pogeey! She was quite the woman.

D.M: Did you ever go to the racetrack?

G.H: Never did. All the years I've been here I never ever went. I'm not a very good gambler.

D.M: Thanks for the interview George.

G.H: Well thanks, you are very welcome! I wish I had more to tell you.