

Diana Matthews interviewing Mr. William Lewis at his home, 479 Niagara Blvd. Fort Erie, July 3rd, 1985.

D.M: Hi Mr. Lewis, how are you today?

W.L: Oh, just fine.

D.M: Were you born in Fort Erie?

W.L: Yes.

D.M: When?

W.L: In 1923, August 5th. I'll be 62 in August.

D.M: Where were you born, at home?

W.L: Yeah.

D.M: Was that this house?

W.L: Well, no.

D.M: Have you lived in Fort Erie all your life?

W.L: Yes.

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

W.L: Swam in the river, played in the alleys... actually, my dad had a coal business, and I used to spend quite a bit of time helping him deliver coal.

D.M: Was his business in Fort Erie?

W.L: Yeah. The silos used to be where the... right where Canadian Tire is now. There were three big silos. The train used to bring the cars in, and then it was dumped into the schute, taken up to the top and it was dumped down into these silos. You would back the truck up underneath these schutes, and fill the truck up and deliver the coal. In some places, it had to be carried in on the shoulder.

D.M: Did he deliver coal to everybody in town here?

W.L: Well, not everybody, because there was other coal companies. Wales had a coal company, and Benners had a coal company... so I think my dad delivered coal until he was about 70 years old.

D.M: What was the name of the business?

W.L: This was called Tate Coal Com pany. Actually, he worked for Bill Tate, who was a Town Clerk in Fort Erie.

D.M: What else did you do when you were a kid, did you go to any amusement parks?

W.L: Oh, yeah, I went to Crystal Beach. I don't remember Erie Beach at all. I don't remember ever being at Erie Beach.

D.M: What was Crystal Beach like?

W.L: Well, it was just a good time! I don't know what it's like now, I haven't been to Crystal Beach in a number of years. I don't know whether the Cyclone's still there. Once I got talked into... I went on it once, and that was enough. I'm not one to pay money to get sick! And I did! I went another time with a girl, I went on these airplanes that fly around, and she was sick on that airplane. I was yelling for the attendant to stop the machine. As I say, to me it was ridiculous. I guess we just made our own fun.

D.M: How old were you when the Depression started?

W.L: Well, the Depression started in '29, and I was born in '23, so I was 6 years old.

D.M: Do you remember much about it?

W.L: Well, I can't remember anything hard or bad in my life at all, really. I was in the army when I was about 18 or 19, and even that... I'm glad I was in the army because it... if a man can come home from the war and not be injured or anything, I think he's very lucky and he's learned alot.

D.M: Do you remember your first job in Fort Erie?

W.L: The only job I've ever had... well, no no... I delivered the Globe and Mail for 5 years, and I had my paper route, which went from the Bowen Road to the Hotel Fort Erie. I took that every morning before I went to school. That was about 5 years... I've worked at Horton Steel ever since.

D.M: Which school did you go to?

W.L: I went to Mather School and then I went to Rose Seaton and I went to Wintemute.

D.M: Tell me about your job at Horton Steel, how old were you when you started there?

W.L: About 19... or 18, I guess. Yeah, I was 18, and I worked almost a year and then went in the army.

D.M: Then you went back to work at Horton Steel after the army?

W.L: After 3 years in the army, I came back and went back to Horton Steel and I was a template maker at Horton Steel.

D.M: You always had the same job?

W.L: I started in the machine shop for a year before the army, and a year after, and then I went in the template shop and that's where I've been ever since.

D.M: What did you do there?

W.L: Template? That's like a pattern, when you build a tank, you have to have a pattern to cut the steel by, or drill the holes. I make those templates so that they can get the shape, and a radius in it has to be formed, and they need curves to get the shape, and I give them those. At one time, it must have been... I think we counted five working in the template shop, now there's just myself.

D.M: You still work there?

W.L: Oh yeah.

D.M: Has Horton Steel changed much since you first started there?

W.L: Very much so.

D.M: How so?

W.L: It was like a family, and they had some fine gentlemen that worked there. They had Mr. Manock and Mr. McMurtry, and then Grant Asplin... real fine gentlemen. I don't think I'll say anything about the present day at Horton Steel.

D.M: Do you remember when they reconstructed the old Fort?

W.L: I remember the old wall, we were talking about that the other day. As I remembered it as a boy, it was just a wall, and it was broken down-knocked down, in fact, I was told... I bought some stones to build a fireplace, and they told me they were originally from the Old Fort, the original fort.

D.M: How about the Peace bridge, do you remember when they built that?

W.L: I don't know what year the Peace Bridge was built...'27? I was pretty small.

D.M: Where did you do your shopping when you were younger, did you go to Jarvis Street?

W.L: Yup. That was about the only place. Jarvis Street was quite a busy section there. I can remember Larsen's butcher shop, Ditchburn had a hardware store, Briggs had a paint and paper place, and Valvo was the shoemaker, Purpura's were on the corner, Mullett had a grocery store, Zears barber shop, Jiggy Cline had a pool room, Heckman's barber shop, Camm's drugstore. This was before Lonsberry's came. Yeo's had the drygoods, The Britannia Restaurant, Lawson's... they had a restaurant where the Post Office is now... I can't think of the lady's name that had the photography shop, she lived two doors from here... Magdalene Morningstar, she had the photography place...Charlie Pong's laundry. I can remember back, well, at the

beginning of the war, Skippy Wong had Skippy's Restaurant on Jarvis Street, and he looks the same today as he looked then. He's a young looking man. All those other businesses... I can't just think of them right offhand.

D.M: It's changed quite a bit, hasn't it?

W.L: Oh, yeah. It's too bad. I imagine the shopping plaza has done it. I've seen people... in fact, a couple I know that will sit up at the plaza... sit in their car and watch the people going into the mall, and they'll stay there for hours, and the same people used to park on Jarvis Street. They are people watchers I guess. That's 40 years, and I'm not saying that they did it every night or anything like that, but they do it now, and they did it then.

D.M: What was there to do for entertainment when you were a young man.

W.L: Baseball. There was the Bellard Theatre, and they had matinees on Saturday afternoon, and they got big crowds. As I understand it, they... it was run by the Ziffs, that would be Louie's mother and father, and as I understand it, the Bellard Theatre was the first initial of each one of the family, Barney and Ella and Louis and... well, there's two L's, and Rosie, David. That's how they got that name, and then there was the Parkway Theatre. They closed up the Bellard and fixed up the Parkway Theatre there, where the ferry dock used to be.

D.M: Did you take the ferry from there very much?

W.L: Oh yeah. I don't think I did much shopping over there, but that's where alot of people did their grocery shopping, up on Grant and Ferry Street.

D.M: You seem to have quite an old house here, have you always lived in this house?

W.L: No, my mother and dad lived here, and I lived here as a boy. When dad gave me the back part of the lot, the property went right through to the high school. He gave me 150 feet of it at the other end, and when my wife and I were married, we built a house up there, and my daughter lives up there now.

D.M: How old is this house?

W.L: Actually, this was a store. When my mother and dad got married, they made this into a house.

D.M: What type of store was it?

W.L.: Well, my dad's father was a... had something to do with the post office, and I think it was just a general store, and where you could come and get your mail, I believe.

D.M.: When would it have changed from a store into a house?

W.L.: Well, I don't know how long it was empty, but as I said, 1920 was when it became a house, but when the store ceased to be, I don't really know.

D.M.: Do you know who built the house, was it your grandparents?

W.L.: Well, yes, it's been... actually, my dad told me and my mother that it was a farm, and it ran from Lewis Street, I guess it ran from, down here by the bridge, and down to the Gilmore Road, and back to the Erie Downs Golf Course. That was the farm. There was three families. There was the Wintemutes, the Lewis', the Warrens... Warren Street, Lewis Street, Catherine Street... Catherine Street was named for Catherine Lewis.

D.M.: What was Lewis Street named for, your family?

W.L.: Yeah, and William Street was named after the family. Where the Ontario Bakery is, that's the old Lewis house. Actually, this is a Wintemute house and property here... the Wintemutes. And the Warrens, I understand, is where the Queens Hotel is, that's the old Warren home.

D.M.: Did you go to the Fort Erie Racetrack very much?

W.L.: Very little. Actually, I worked in the parking lot, and I went up to see those boys last Sunday morning and they asked me if I would come back Saturday and Sunday this week because the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Ride, the Musical Ride is going on there. They wanted a little hand, because they expect about 10,000 people there, so I thought I'd go up those two days.

D.M.: Has it changed very much since you worked there?

W.L.: I don't know too much about the Racetrack. What I knew about the Racetrack, what little I knew... well, they used to hold, I can remember that, they used to hold the Bertie Fair at the Racetrack.

D.M.: I thought the Bertie Fair was at the...

W.L.: Not always in the... what we called the Bertie Fair. Now, it was a good fair.

D.M.: I guess I was thinking of the Farmers Picnic.

W.L.: Oh yeah, but no, there was the fair up in Welland. Yeah, but they had it under the grandstand, and out on the pavement by the track,

and I guess they had things... oh, they had races, and all kind of games. It was quite a fair.

D.M: Does that still go on?

W.L: No.

D.M: When did that end?

W.L: Oh, it's been gone for years. I don't know what stopped it. The racetrack didn't have a good reputation. People used to keep their laundry in and everything else! They didn't leave it out overnight when the track was... but, it's a well looked after establishment now. When I went up to... for a job in the parking lot, I had to be fingerprinted and photographed and everything. That's why they wanted me to give them a hand, because I... the permit that I have got is for two years, so they don't have to go through that again. I'm all cleared up there.

D.M: Tell me some more of the thing you used to do when you were a kid.

W.L: Well we used to peek through the windows at what used to be Herb Guess' Garage, and watch the fights through the window. They also had fights up at the Erie Beach Community Centre I think they called it, in the Scout Hall, up off the Dominion Road. I was there once as a... just a little boy, and... these fellows that fought up there are around today, I can't think... in fact, I ate with a fellow at a dinner dance here last Friday night, and I was sure that he had fought back then, but he said that he didn't fight up there.

D.M: What were they fighting for?

W.L: I don't really know. There's a man that... the plumber in Stevensville... Mr.... he lived down by Black Creek... Wale.

D.M: Lloyd Wale?

W.L: Was it Lloyd? This man has got to be in his eighties. I thought... yes, I'm sure, 'cause I saw him at the garage here five or six years ago, and I told him that I had seen him wrestling up at the community centre, and he was quite proud of that, that I had seen it. And a fellow by the name of Tarzan Morningstar, his parents had the grocery store at the corner of Robinson and Phipps Street. It's an apartment building now... and Martin Purpura, Jim Bright... I imagine that's the only ones I can think of. Oh, there's a couple of funny stories, but I'm not going to say them. There was alot of gambling going on at these... one fellow... there was a mixup, and one fellow was

a little leery of this other fellow, and he jumped out of the ring and ran to the dressing room, and the other fellow was in the ring, and his brother was his second that helped him in between, and he was so happy that he had this towel and he threw it up in the air, and they disqualified him! All because he threw the towel in the ring. The other fellow that ran out of the ring, he won the fight! And there was alot of money bet. The fellow that threw the towel is still alive, both other fighters are dead, Jim Bright and Martin Purpura.

D.M: It must have been an exciting place to live.

W.L: Fort Erie... it's a good place to... it's always been a good place. I've always enjoyed living here, but it's like the hub, I always tell people that, that think we're out in the sticks, and actually, we're in the hub. In 10 minutes, you can be in downtown Buffalo, you can be to Kleinhan's Music Hall, you can be to the Memorial Auditorium, you can be down on Main Street shopping in 10 minutes. In 15 minutes, you can be... well, 20 minutes, you can be in Welland. You can be at the Seaway Mall up there, 15 or 20 minutes to Port Colborne. In half an hour, you can be in Pen Centre in St. Catharines. We've got everything here, really. That's what I think hurt... that's what hurt Jarvis Street, and maybe a few of the merchants maybe, hurta little bit themselves. It's been a... we've had the fights, bootleggers and the kids used to dive in the river for... years later and bring up beer bottles that... see, what they'd do, the rumrunners, so they tell me, had a powerful boat, and the Coast Guard would be waiting for them, and if they were gonna be caught, they'd throw the cases of beer over the... throw them overboard so that they wouldn't catch them with the evidence. And as I understand, they used to smuggle Chinese across the border.

D.M: To Buffalo?

W.L: Yeah. I've heard that they threw Chinese people overboard too. Whether that's true or not... another funny story... I don't know why... the laws... maybe they couldn't go from China to the States, because they could go from China to Canada and then into the States, maybe. You know where the aerial car is in Niagara Falls? Well, they used to... a Chinese man or woman would want to go to the States, they'd take them down to the aerial car, and if you look, it looks like it goes from Canada to the States, but because

of the turn in the river, it's going from Canada to Canada. They told them to get on the car, and the minute they hit the other side, get off and run! And that's what they did, and they were still in Canada. And they paid these people to get them into the States. You would swear... the way that the river turns, that you are going into the States, but it's Canada to Canada. In the wintertime, we had the ice fishing out on the lake, I was almost... the kids used to swim from... oh, they'd start about the ferry dock, and they'd swim over to Buffalo and they'd rest, and then they'd swim down to William's dock at the foot of Bowen Road. Down at the foot of Jarvis Street, there's sand docks, and I can remember... I think I started at the pumphouse. I was only about 8 or 9 I imagine, and they used to bring in... oh, they brought in cocoa butter, I know that, I can remember that, and probably coal and things like that, on big barges. Where it came from I don't know, but the tug would bring the big barges and tie up at the sand dock. Those barges might be, oh, longer than the house, I imagine, and quite wide, and I got too close to the front of it, what with the current coming underneath the barge, I could feel it starting to suck me underneath this big barge, I couldn't have held my breath long enough, and I just swam for all I was worth. I remember just barely coming around the corner of that barge, I came so close. I've never had a desire for a boat, I don't know anything about fishing, and I've lived here all these years on the river.

D.M: Do you find that there is alot of tourists in Fort Erie, American tourists?

W.L: Oh, yes. I looked at the Peace Bridge tonight... and well, they come over for Bingo, and maybe that was Bingo time, but they were lined up right as far as you could see on the other side around the bend on the other side of the Peace Bridge. Bumper to bumper all the way, trucks and cars.

D.M: Has it always been that way?

W.L: I've seen it, oh, this was when I was a kid... seen four lanes of traffic just bumper to bumper solid, both ways. Oh, I don't know how long... as I say, it's been years, but oh, it took hours to get across there. The ferry dock used to... the ferry used to be quite busy too.

D.M: What were they coming here for, there wasn't always Bingo here, was there?

W.L: No, no. That's now. That, and the Chinese restaurants. I don't know what... there was Crystal Beach, and then of course there was Erie Beach. There was an article in some paper, I think it originates from St. Catharines, I believe, and it was an article on Erie Beach. That was a good article. If anyone was interested in... there's lots of things in there that I never knew. Today, that property... I understand they want quite a sum for it. That would make a beautiful park for picnics and... it's beautiful in there. It is nice.

D.M: Can you think of anything else you would like to add?

W.L: Not really.

D.M: Thanks very much for the interview.

W.L: Well, I hope it's some help to you.