

This is Neil Flidall in the home of Mrs. Mary Field, apartment number 411, Number One Albany Place, Fort Erie, Ontario on the Eleventh day of July, 1985.

N.F: When did you first come to Fort Erie?

M.F: Well let me see...I'm seventy-six and I had my thirteenth birthday in Erie Beach...and I was born in 1909...so figure that out...1922.

N.F: What did you think of Fort Erie when you arrived, was it smaller than what you were used to?

M.F: Oh, sure, Canada only had nine million people when I lived here.

N.F: And where did you come from?

M.F: Buffalo...but I'm born in New York City.

N.F: Well there would be a lot of difference between New York City, and here.

M.F: Yes, but I was only a year old when I left.

N.F: That's a little bit better then...for the shock anyway.

M.F: Well, I went to school here for two years.

N.F: What schools did you attend?

M.F: Douglas School...junior fourth and senior fourth.

N.F: That was when it was up on the hill?

M.F: It is still up there, yes.

N.F: Did they have the hills terraced at that time?

M.F: Yes, and oh were they ever great in the winter.

N.F: Where did you live when you first came to Fort Erie?

M.F: On Lakeshore Road, up near Bard ol, there's a lady who lives there now, where they have redone the whole house...Lester Vesterfelt's daughter lives there.

N.F: There are some nice homes up through there.

M.F: This was just a little summer place...we were only here for the summer...see then we moved down here...where the Peace Bridge now stands...before the wall, the breakwall was built...we had a mill race there.

N.F: Tell me about the mill race, what was it like?

M.F: Well it was just water running through between some land...and then some additional land, the water itself at one time was used for a type of mill, a long time ago...you could go over all those

rocks and get out onto the river, that was a very beautiful spot, and quite popular for pictures...the abutments weren't there then... that is before the Peace Bridge was built...there were two ships built down there...did you know that?

N.F: No, I had no idea.

M.F: At the foot of Queen Street...yes, two ships they were welded... when they launched the first one...it sank...I don't know what happened to the second one.

N.F: Is that right, it sank?

M.F: They had a dock there...and I used to swim there...where they launched the boat...but there were two ships...I don't know what company built them, though.

N.F: Was it a local company?

M.F: I really don't know...of course the dummy, ran from where I lived on down to the Baby Hole...the Ferry Dock rather...the Sand Fly Express, your dad would know all about that, they crossed at the Old Fort...they would send one from one end...one from the other end...and they would cross this way, pass each other, and they would continue on...in the busy time of the season...I cannot remember the name of the two Erie Beach Boats...and that surprises me... because I remember the other ones, for Crystal Beach...but they had a lovely Dance Hall.

N.F: It must have been grand when it was open.

M.F: They didn't have the sand to blow on your food and that...that Crystal Beach has...and they had a beautiful swimming pool...diving pool... wading pool...quite the set up...and then I used to swim at Lakeside... which people today, I don't think they would know where it is.

N.F: Where is it?

M.F: Just down from Erie Beach...just a term...like they call Cosy Dell, there really isn't a Cosy Dell, as far as...you'll never find it on a map...and that was called the Lakeside area...and of course...all the summer residents liked to stay there...then in the fall I had my thirteenth birthday there...and in the fall we came down here... there was three cottages in a row, and we lived in one of them... and when the Peace Bridge came along then we had to get out...

and we moved across the street...and there used to be a dance hall there...where part of the Garrison Inn property is now...and they had a Black Band, called Cap Romack and His Algerians, and they had the wheels, up in the ceiling you know, like the big wagon wheels, and they held lanterns...oh and they used to have some good crowds too...and a lot of good dancing...and then...Dr. Derbyshire, he had his office there...yes that was where he had his first office...because I lived next door...because they moved our house across the street, and the house I lived in, is now number 15 on Forsyth Street.

N.F: It has been moved down to there since?

M.F: It was just a small place...it was only my brother and I, my Mother worked in Buffalo, she was a laundress, my brother went to school over there and I finished school here and then I went to work...I didn't go to high school.

N.F: Not too many people did at that time.

M.F: Well, Mr. Sexsmith...well girls in those days weren't supposed to go to high school (don't get me going on that).

N.F: I hear that you were quite the swimmer.

M.F: Well I became interested in the swimming at Lakeside...I almost drowned up there, so I made up my mind...I was going to swim...so I swam.

N.F: You used to swim the Niagara River, and I mean across the Niagara River, from Fort Erie to Buffalo?

M.F: Yes.

N.F: That must be quite the battle.

M.F: It is fast moving but...you can't beat it of course...you go with it...you simply can't beat it, and the current, that would be impossible...there was a man who wanted to bet an awful lot of money that he could swim, you know, where the Baby Hole is to...to the old rowing club, along the canal right there.

N.F: Where would you start from when you swam the river, (across)?

M.F: I would start where the abutment of the Peace Bridge now stands.

N.F: And where would you land?

M.F: I would land at the foot of Delevan Avenue.

N.F: That must have been a mighty fast trip.

M.F: Oh, I was young then.

N.F: Did you swim back again?

M.F: Nope, we would ride back on the Ferry Boat...we would hop up on to the side and take the swells back...that was on the side wheelers that were used for the Ferry.

N.F: That sounds like a good idea.

M.F: It was a lot of fun.

N.F: And your son also swam the river?

M.F: Yes he did.

N.F: How old was he at the time?

M.F: Just nine years old.

N.F: I bet that garnered a lot of publicity, at that time.

M.F: Well I will tell you...he went all over the world on the "Pathe News", you know, that sort of thing, they had the movie people all over here, and then it was released to the papers and it played in the movie houses at that time...they had footage of him in the water and also coming out of the water...it was the same thing with me...the captains on the Ferry Boats arranged that for me...with movie and newspaper coverage, it was interesting and it was exciting.

N.F: I can imagine that it was very exciting.

M.F: So then I stayed here until I was eighteen, and then...and then I married a Canadian...he was from Thorold...he died almost six years ago...he was quite a hockey player, you know, an amateur...my son is also...and then I moved to Buffalo...well then due to incidental things, I came back here...I had no intention of moving back here, but I did...so I lived in Ridgeway for fifteen years, then I retired from work...I worked in General Motors in Buffalo...so when I retired from there I wanted to do something so I became a cancer driver, I take people wherever they need to go, for doctors or treatments.

N.F: I've heard a lot of good things about that.

M.F: Well I can tell you I'm not wanting for anything to do.

N.F: When you first moved into the south end of Fort Erie, was it very populated?

M.F: No.

N.F: There were not too many families?

M.F: Well, you had more stores down there in the Chinese end there... you had Habgoods...at the Salvation Army Store there...there was a dry goods store there...you had a meat market on the corner of Forsyth and the Boulevard...of course you had the Anglo American Hotel, which was very popular here then, oh, yes, that is when the Hunt family owned it...and the Queen's Hotel was always there on the corner of Queen Street and the Boulevard...Hawkins was there then and he owned it at that time.

N.F: That would be Harry Hawkins, they say he is quite a character.

M.F: Yes, he was quite a character...was into almost everything...that is where they had the nice little room...upstairs you know, you could get a drink there...what did they call it...they had a name for it, bootlegging, they had a little bit of everything...but they had then... on the other side of the street was the pool hall, of course that is where the Bus Stop is now, Kar-Mel's.

N.F: The pool hall was there then, I didn't realize that.

M.F: And Sullivan had his Fish and Chip Shop, on the Boulevard there.

N.F: I guess that was popular.

M.F: Oh yes...fifteen cents...it sure was, and then we had Mr. Miller, he used to go down the railroad track, behind the stores, with his bagpipes and he would play...and then the house where Sullivan is now the shop eventually...that was down on the bottom where the Road family lived there...Froggy Roads used to work on the Ferry Boats....he was very aptly named...and then they had all these cottages down the river which they have done away with... on the other side of that grocery store...because that really all belongs to the Park Commission now...and that has changed quite a bit.

N.F: Were those boat houses year round residences?

M.F: No no, just for the summer...because even Girdie Thompson, and the Thompson that had the Fishing License...I don't know even if they stayed in the winter time, they may have because...Girdie Thompson's Mother, I wouldn't put it past her to stay there...but then of course Doc Douglas had his place down there...his house, and they had a theatre there, and the King Eddie Hotel, it's always

been there but it didn't have the reputation it had now...but the swimming hole, the Baby Hole as it has always been called, everybody says where do you go swimming...the Baby Hole, it is the only name it has ever been called by...but it is dominated mostly by Americans I call myself a foreigner when I go down there...but still as far as I'm concerned it is a good place to swim...I wish they hadn't put those rocks there, because it stopped the flow of water, the first year the rocks were put there a child died...and I wish there was some way the Parks Commission would come down there and clean it up and look after it...they used to have a life guard there, Del Davidson was the life guard there...if they still had someone there you wouldn't have the problems coming up now as they are...of course you were never allowed to drink there...which is ignored now.

N.F: Do you remember when bootlegging used to be big in the area?

M.F: Oh yes, Barney Leper...had the fastest ship on Lake Erie, hah, hah, he would be rich one day and broke the next...and then there was a man they called the Big Canuck, well he could row, what was it, fifty cases in a rowboat, that is it, right by himself load and unload and row that boat right across that river.

N.F: Fifty cases?

M.F: That is why they called him the Big Canuck, and he was huge...that is what he was known for I can't remember too many names right now, but oh, the rum runners and the bootleggers...such excitement, and noise, and guns, and parties all over...people drinking all over too...you'd always find parts of broken bottles down around the river, and the lake and the Baby Hole, yes that was never a dull time.

N.F: Fort Erie has had a colourful past.

M.F: Oh yes, you know, I liked the Old Fort better before it was brought back to the original shape.

N.F: What was it like then?

M.F: Well it was rough, you know, they had the war and of course it, the Fort itself was all blown apart...but it was a beautiful place to go...of course it is now too...it attracts a lot of tourists, but, you didn't have the concession stand there at that time...it was

just the Old Fort...and of course the miles of rocks they have along the shore now because it is all eroding...it is being washed away badly...they will probably have to put up a wall one day...maybe in my time...I can remember the lake being so much lower than it is now...we used to be able to ice skate from down there where Mather Arch is...we used to be able to ice skate all the way up to Erie Beach...huge amounts of snow...higher than this room...and the ice...the water would be clear you know, you could see the greenery and the frozen fish there.

N.F: That would be beautiful.

M.F: Yes, but you see you can't do that now.

N.F: No, not at all.

M.F: Well they put the Ice Boom there anyway, which of course we are all against, it helps the ones down there but let them...build their own wall...but I don't know much else that I can tell you, of course we could use another building here like this one...there is a terribly long waiting list here...it's hard to find almost anyplace to live...it is like before the war...when they started all the war time housing for the workers they brought in...there was no place for them to go...during the Second World War I worked for Curtis Wright in Buffalo...that was a busy place at that time.

N.F: Did you have a hard time crossing the border?

M.F: No, we had...a Border Crossing Card, to carry, you know if they asked for it and, that was all.

N.F: That was all that was required?

M.F: Yes, my being born in the United States, my mother had a more difficult time really...when she went back to the States...my mother was Austrian, and you see in those days my father never took out United States papers...and so they could have shipped her back to Austria really...they couldn't us because we were born in the United States and so she had to go to Washington and everything, to get it all straightened out...to get back to the United States...those things have changed too.

N.F: The Ferry that went from Fort Erie to Buffalo, the ships that did that, were they large ships?

- M.F:** Well you had...now that is something my son could tell you about... the City of Toledo carried about fifty cars...of assorted types... then there was the Orleans which went all winter.
- N.F:** It did run all winter?
- M.F:** Oh yes, I went to work on it...all the winter...I think it carried about seventeen cars...they had the Grand Island, and the Jamaica...the Jamaica and the Toledo and the New Town were all side wheelers, so they didn't run in the winter...only the Orleans ran in the winter... and then you had people that travelled back and forth...we have a man up here in five-o-five, Mr. Ed Corey...he's eighty-three years old, now he lived up and back of Douglas School, and he can tell you about a lot...about Fort Erie and the Ferry because he and his wife used to cross on the Ferry Boat all the time.
- N.F:** What can you tell me about the early Race Track?
- M.F:** Well it was only a dirt track...and it had huge crowds...but not as huge as they had when the A Class horses ran here...but, of course you only have the B Class horses now...even with the Musical Ride, they did not draw the attendance they expected...but the track is a beautiful track today.
- N.F:** What were the buildings like?
- M.F:** Well, the buildings where they keep the horses, the barns, were nothing like it is today, and they certainly did not have the big over-hanging grandstand, with the broadcasting booth upstairs.
- N.F:** Did you ever go to the Bertie Fair?
- M.F:** Yes, it was held there at the track...I have been there but...I was just there once...and then of course over here we have the Catholic Church where the cemetary is...that is where I belonged when I was a Catholic...and of course Father Common was the Pastor then and he was down where the brewery is...across the street that was the Catholic Church...that is where Bridgeburg started, and Amagari was behind or west of there.
- N.F:** Fort Erie has changed in a few ways hasn't it?
- M.F:** Overnight...overnight we were just simply all called Fort Erie, no more Bridgeburg, no more Amagari, no vote no nothing...it was amazing, I don't remember anything like it at all.

N.F: There must have been people who were against the idea.

M.F: Well we didn't like it...but I don't think people protested then... the older people didn't...not like what goes on right now.

N.F: Did you know your politicians well at that time?

M.F: Well, Lou Douglas was our Reeve, and I certainly knew him.

N.F: Was he a popular man?

M.F: Yes he was...quite popular...in more ways than one, hah, hah.

N.F: Was there a hot dog stand on Bertie Street?

M.F: On the corner of Bertie Street and the Niagara Boulevard.

N.F: And who operated it?

M.F: Les Thompson did, and his wife Alice...it was a busy place, it was a stand with hot dogs and stuff...there was that place by the Baby Hole, now who had that hot dog stand there...that is before Sullivan moved up the street and operated his back door for the sun bathers... and our Legion Hall used to be the Library, there on Queen Street.

N.F: That must have been quite a while ago.

M.F: Well I went the school in Fort Erie.

N.F: That building must have been almost everything in the south end.

M.F: Yes, we had no library then on Gilmore, that is all new, we had no baseball diamonds or tennis courts there either.

N.F: Where was the south end Fort Erie Fire Department located?

M.F: In the Bertie Street Fire Hall, yes Company Number One, Fort Erie, that is the only one I remember then...and then Albany Road was just a dirt road then, and there was a dance hall back here, because my old man won a prize one time, and brought back a box of candy he had won, it was just a hall, a place where people would go to dance...we had more fun in those days...than all the kids today.

N.F: I can well imagine.

M.F: We used to take the dummy up to Erie Beach, the Sand Fly Express, and then Mrs. Dunkell on the corner of Walnut Street and Goderich Street had an Ice Cream Stand, and we had a Chinese Place on Jarvis Street and one down here in the south end, that is the laundry, right near Millers, Scotty Miller's store...and the Kids used to throw stones at this Chinaman...and call him a chinky, chinky Chinaman, hah, hah...and you know fishermen used to catch the suckers, carp down

there...and they could eat them, because they were good, they were solid...I've eaten them, and smelt, we used to get a lot of smelt down here, yes...but I cannot remember the old Erie Beach Boat's names...they had two boats...the Crystal Beach Boats were much nicer riding, because they rode the waves this way...the two boats from Erie Beach were wide and cumbersome...and how many times we were caught by the ice on the Ferry...it ran all winter long...the ice would be thick because there were no bridge piers to break it up, and nothing to slow it down...and now they are squacking about the ice...it makes me laugh, because things still worked well enough then...and that is about all that I can tell you.

N.F: Thank you very much for the interview.