

Diana Matthews interviewing Al Spear at the Fort Erie Public Library, April 18th, 1985.

D.M: Hi Al.

A.S: Hi!

D.M: What's your full name?

A.S: Allen Spear.

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

A.S: Since 1925.

D.M: You were born here?

A.S: That's correct.

D.M: Where were you born?

A.S: Up on No. 3 Highway where there used to be an old farm that's no longer there and Dunn the Movers have part of that property now.

D.M: Was it your parents farm?

A.S: Yes.

D.M: Did they do farming there, what did they have, crops?

A.S: My dad worked at Horton Steel and was a full time farmer as well, he did both things.

D.M: What did he raise?

A.S: Chickens, cows, sold eggs, they had these cereal crops, the whole shmear as well as riding a bicycle to Horton Steel for 9 dollars and 95 cents a week.

D.M: Did you go to school in Fort Erie?

A.S: Yes, I went to school in Fort Erie at Douglas School which is now closed, then the Fort Erie High School and then the University of Toronto.

D.M: What was Fort Erie like when you were a kid, different than it is now?

A.S: Yeah, probably, I thought a bit about this because I knew it was coming. I think one of the things..... Probably the biggest difference, when you were a kid, you knew who lived in every house, and there were alot of vacant lots between the houses. Even though Fort Erie is quite sprawled out as such the Old Town of Fort Erie, going back, there used to be an awful lot of vacant lots, there aren't any more. That has changed. Everything was centered around the Peace Bridge then, and the railroad, now there isn't much railroad so most of the things that happened in Fort Erie are now.....

The Peace Bridge or perhaps Fleet. Fleet didn't start until something '33 I believe. So in my growing up days there was no such thing as Fleet or M.B.B. or that possibility, that was just a vacant field.

D.M: What part did the railroad play in Fort Erie?

A.S: It had a very large impact on the economics because there was so many people that were hired either as trainmen or maintenance people or track men, it also had a tremendous impact on the smoke that used to drop on the North End of Town. It was really just a sign of the economy, if everyone was dirty and black, then everyone made money. That's the same as in Buffalo, it was a railroad town, but that's changed.

D.M: What was Jarvis Street like?

A.S: Going back then? Not a great deal different really.

D.M: I mean the businesses.

A.S: They're not a great deal different, there were different people who ran them. Things that come to mind.... Morley Kirkland had a shop for years, McMorrans had a clothing shop, Ted Dove and Dust Jackson had mens stores and and Ross Yeo had a drygoods store and Skippy Wong had the chinese retaurant and the A&P and Bakers had a store on the corner and they sold newspapers and probably one of the first Jewish families in town, Kassier, they had a dry goods store. The Federal Building wasn't there, that came later, the Post Office. It's not all that much different except in the make-up of the stores, generally Jarvis Street hasn't changed that much, it really hasn't, it hasn't improved or gone downhill, it's changed, but not all that radically. The cars still park at the same angle, they were the same number and depending on the time of the year, they were either American or Canadian.

D.M: How did the Depression affect the town?

A.S: Well, at one time the town went bankrupt and had to be taken over by the Province of Ontario to get them out of debt. 1931 was the year that Bridgeburg and Fort Erie amalgamated into the name Fort Erie, that was in '31. It was shortly after that, that the province took over the town for a couple of years, they were so badly in debt.

D.M: Why did it go bankrupt?

A.S: Same as everybody else, when you spend more than you take in, you have some problems. They had anticipated, I guess, greater revenues, alot of people lost jobs and couldn't pay their taxes, the

town didn't have the funds to do the things that they had planned to do, maybe had already done. Bankrupt isn't the right word for a town but they were in such bad financial shape, the province took them over for a couple of years.

D.M: That was after the Peace Bridge was built, wasn't it?

A.S: Yes.

D.M: Didn't the American economy help Fort Erie at all?

A.S: In 1929, that was the start of the Depression, nobody could help anything. There were so many things that had been bought on time and so much was anticipated that didn't happen, that really the Depression just flattened everybody, Americans or Canadians. It really didn't matter, the Depression was just disaster... for everybody.

D.M: Do you remember any large fires happening in Fort Erie?

A.S: There used to be fires regularly at Erie Beach. My dad was a volunteer fireman. It was never right out stated, but I think most of them were insurance fires. There used to be houses and things burn regularly at Erie Beach right after the Depression. Regularly. 2 ,3 or 4 houses at a time. Not really other than those. Ridgeway's had a couple of dandies. Ridgeway's had a couple that wiped a whole business block out at two different times.

D.M: When was that?

A.S: I'm guessing. Mid-forties probably, the last one, and that wiped out the whole business block. The biggest one that is a recent one that happened here was when Niagra Coal and Lumber burned, that was probably one of the bigger fires in Fort Erie. There have been others, but not really all that large in Fort Erie that I'm aware of.

D.M: What about bad stretches of weather, blizzards and stuff like that?

A.S: Well, again, we know '77 and we know '85. There was one back.... I don't think there was anything worse than those, that I can remember. The snowplowing equipment was a little different. There were times when there would be one path down the Niagra Boulevard and if a car... you had to back up then to Gilmore or to a side street, there was no way for two cars to pass, there was just two ruts and so there was no way for two cars to pass. The exact date of that I don't know. I certainly remember the arena falling down in '36. That was a wet snowstorm on March the 17th, about two feet of it, but it was gone in a matter of days, it didn't last all that long.

D.M: You mentioned cars, did many people have cars in Fort Erie?

A.S: I don't think anybody had two! Really, I don't know of anybody that had two cars. It would be different from now, certainly there were fewer cars but I'd say most people had a car, but nobody had two! Nobody.

D.M: You worked on the Peace Bridge, is that true?

A.S: When the Peace Bridge was being built, my mother took me down in a stroller to watch it, I was two years old.

D.M: Why was it built?

A.S: There were many many reasons, probably one of the innocent reasons.....

Back around 1910, alot of people thought that a memorial to a hundred years of peace, which would have been 1914, would be a great thing and what better memorial for peace for a hundred years than a bridge, and call it the Peace Bridge. And then the first World War came and that sort of died. Probably the main reason that it was built was the.... the ferry was very slow... but it still gets to be financial. That a group of people saw a way of improving their lives one way or another either by financially or by finding a way to get to their summer homes or whatever. But I think as in most things that are done, no matter how good the original intent is, there's alot of money hiding somewhere. So people saw that they could develop things in Fort Erie perhaps, or they could start businesses in Fort Erie or they could sell land in Fort Erie or they could buy land in Fort Erie. Alot of it had to do with money, certainly it did. The original intents were all noble, the building of it was a great thing, certainly there weren't too many negatives about the whole thing, so it became fairly easy. But in the backs of the minds of many of the people was a chance to make money, one way or another.

D.M: And did they?

A.S: No. Depression. There were some people that made money, that's covered in the book* but there were alot of people who really started schemes to cheat people and there were others who had genuine interests in developing something, but with the depression they went broke, it worked both ways.

D.M: You mentioned the Americans and their summer homes, has Fort Erie always been a type of summer resort for the Americans?

A.S: Yes, and it ~~always~~ probably will be because alot of the properties on the lakeshore, when they change hands, they just change within

the family, father , son, whatever. So I'm afraid the title will, to alot of our choice properties, will remain American for a long long time.

D.M: You mentioned the ferry, which ferry was that?

A.S: There have been any number of ferries travelling between Fort Erie and Buffalo. There was a ferry at Bowen Road that went across to Buffalo, another ferry from Dufferin Street that went to Buffalo, Catherine Street to Buffalo and Bertie Street to Buffalo, and they all ended up in the south end of town at Bertie Street and that finished in 1949 I believe was the last ferry ride. That was the only method of transportation prior to the Peace Bridge, there was no other way to get there. It was very very slow and there were traffic jams for miles and miles and miles, even in 1927.

D.M: When you were a teenager living in Fort Erie, what did you do for fun?

A.S: Well, me personally, I probably spent 90% of my time in atheletics, so it would have been different maybe than alot of others. Saturday night, a big Saturday night or a Friday night was, in the wintertime, basketball double headers at the school with a girlfriend, not much different than now except there weren't the opportunities to do crazy things because they weren't avialable. You didn't even bother with a drink or anything like that when we were kids because it was just not the thing to do, nobody else did it, there was no peer pressure. I'm not sure we could have gotten away with it anyway, but there was no peer pressure to do that kind of thing. Saturday night would have been a show, a restaurant.

D.M: Where did you go see a show?

A.S: 99% of the time, right here in town.

D.M: Is there a theatre that's still....

A.S: Well, the one that's down in a very bad state of repair at the south end called the Parkway. That was a brand new theatre, it was built in '39, before the war, so prior to that the Bellard is over at Don Deans. And then prior to that , which I wasn't around then, but prior to that was the Regent.

D.M: Did you go see movies, or was it a live show?

A.S: Oh, no.

D.M: Wh o did you see, do you remember?

A.S: Oh, sure! They're all coming back now, Humphrey Bogart, George Raft, Doris Day, Dorothy Lamoure, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, The Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Ronald Coleman, that era anyway.

D.M: What about social gatherings, did you go to church?

A.S: Oh, always.

D.M: Which church?

A.S: I went to St. Pauls, personally.

D.M: Is that still standing?

A.S: Oh sure.

D.M: Where is it?

A.S: On the Boulevard, the big stone church on the right off the foot of Gilmore Road. But there were those who probably more church centered than today. Personally, I wasn't church centered, we did things..... I had a girlfriend, the same girlfriend, probably for 4 or 5 years, almost all the way through high school, so Saturday night was pretty well planned and plotted and with Friday nights too, we knew where we were going and what we were going to do. I don't think I was that much different than anybody else, we went to high school, most of the people had girlfriends and girlfriends had boyfriends. There weren't as many goofy things to do. As an example, drugs were non-existent, so even if you wanted to, they weren't there.

D.M: Did you ever have reason to go to Buffalo for entertainment?

A.S: At that time, once in a while, but not too often. We were pretty well in a wartime area and war time frame and there were very severe restrictions on gasoline, there were severe restrictions on how much money you could take out of the country, you weren't allowed to take Canadian money out of the country and you weren't allowed to have any American money to take out of the country. All of those restrictions were there so you really had to make most of your entertainment, during the war years, very close to home and most of it walking or riding a bicycle because there wasn't enough gas to do many things. If you had a car and if your dad would let you use it and you could afford the gasoline. You couldn't get a coupon to buy it anyway.

D.M: You had to buy it with coupons?

A.S: Yes.

D.M: Ration coupons?

A.S: Ration coupons.

D.M: How did the war affect your family, did your father still have the farm at that time?

A.S: Oh, no no. By then we'd moved into town. I was born in Fort Erie. My dad lived on Garrison Road, but we lived in the south end of town.

D.M: Did your family have a business?

A.S: No, my dad worked at Horton Steel right until he retired. Hmmm.. How did the war affect us.... I don't really... I don't know how to answer that. I really don't know. In as much as my brother nor I were..... I tried to get in in the last year and they wouldn't take me because I had some problems. My brother, they wouldn't take him either, he was just a little bit older. I was just at the end of the war era.....

D.M: What I meant was, was there ever any type of fear?

A.S: Constantly.

D.M: What type?

A.S: Seeing people you went to school with go off to war and then reading they were dead, shot down. Your cousin or your nephew or your dad's brother or whatever. It was just a constant fear. The only time there wasn't fear I guess, maybe, was in 1945 when there was no doubt the trend had switched, and it was going the other way. Yeah, it was always there, even though we weren't that actively involved. You turned the radio on and 90% of what was on the radio was that. My girlfriend had 3 or 4 brothers in the service and every time the phone rang, there was a wonder if it was..... or a letter or whatever. Yes, there was always fear. No doubt, it was always there, it never went away.

D.M: Do you remember when you heard your first radio?

A.S: No, I probably remember better the first radio that my dad and mom bought that I was aware they were buying a radio. There was a little store at the foot of Bertie Street and I don't think anybody would remember this, but there was a little store at the foot of Bertie Street and my mom and dad went in and my grandfather and my grandmother and they bought two floor model radios and the name of the radio was Bosch. A Bosch. And they were just fantastic when we had that radio. That was probably in '28, maybe.

D.M: What radio stations did you listen to?

A.S: Oh, I don't know. There weren't that many.

D.M: Where were they from, Buffalo?

A.S: Oh, yes. Buffalo and possibly St. Catharines. St. Catharines hasn't in a long time but 90% of them were from Buffalo.

(In this next paragraph, Mr. Spear speaks of his father working at the shipyards.)

Prior to going to work at Horton Steel or maybe on a lay-off from Horton Steel, I don't know which, but he worked there for one summer, and that's exactly what it was, they built boats. And the purpose of the boats, they were lake type boats and they were freighters and there was an outfit from Toronto, Canadian Shipbuilding I believe was the name, and they built boats and hauled them up the river and then either took them down through the Erie Canal, or took them up through the Welland Canal, one way or the other. I guess like a lot of other things, it just didn't work out. It was war subsidised and certainly that made it go better, after the war, it just wasn't financially capable of being a successful operation. That's about all anybody knows about the shipyards.

D.M: When did you start working in Fort Erie?

A.S: The first job I had of any consequence was at Fleet during the war. I got out of Grade 13 in March and I went to work at Fleet working 60 hours a week for 18 bucks.

D.M: What did you do?

A.S: At that time I was a floor timekeeper.

D.M: What's that?

A.S: I kept time! Of what the men did, what job they were on and... It's a method of proportioning cost, is what it really was.

D.M: Where did you go on from there?

A.S: I worked at Horton Steel a couple of summers and then I went to work for a place called Novadel-Agene in Fort Erie that is now... that then changed to Wallace and Tiernan and is now Penwal on the Garrison Road, No. 3 Highway and from there I went to the Bridge.

D.M: What was your job at the bridge, what were you hired for?

A.S: Secretary-Treasurer.

D.M: Are you still Secretary-Treasurer?

A.S: Yes.

D.M: Tell me about Novadel-Agene.

A.S: You really want to know about Novadel-Agene?!?!

D.M: I sure do.

A.S: Alright. Back in the 20's when you milled flour and after flour was milled, and it still would be, it would be what you called green,

you couldn't bake it. The enzyme... the protein is such that it just doesn't bake so therefore you couldn't make bread or anything until you have aged flour. When you had a very large flour mill such as a Robin Hood or a Monarch or Quaker Oats or whatever, you would need literally hundreds and hundreds of acres of storage space to store the flour to let it age before you could ship it and bake it. So these people in Holland found a way to chemically age or change the protein. And Novadel, I think, is something like new, and Agene is process, that kind of situation. So they came over here and started both in Buffalo and here in Fort Erie, a plant to make the chemicals to age flour. That's what Novadel-Agene was and they shipped it all over and it became very succesful, then they went into oxidizing agents for the chemical industry, and plasticisers, catalysts for various chemical reactions. The plant has grown, probably has close to 20 employees now, it's a long time but it's one of the very stable industries. Then I went to the Bridge in '71.

D.M: You work for the American side?

A.S: My office is on the American side, yes.

D.M: But you work for the Canadian side.

A.S: I work for the Bridge company, period. There's no such thing as American or Canadian in terms of the Bridge. It's The Bridge.

(Next, Mr. Spear talks about the bookie joints in Fort Eries past.)
Fort Erie was really the bookie capital of North America. At one time there was probably 5 or 6 bookie joints in Fort Erie, patronized mostly by Americans. Alot of people made an awful lot of money in the bookie joints. There was one practically across the street from where we lived and I can remember where they must have had a tip that it was going to be raided cause all the cars, all the people all of a sudden came out, cars all left and then the police came. There were times at the North End of town when the people couldn't use their radios because the power that was generated from the reciever at the bookie place to get the race results, was so great that they couldn't use their radio recievers in certain areas here in the North End of the town. It was a very large business. It had as many as 5 operating at once, taking all the bets for many many many people. The Ma yor of the town and the Chief of Police both got brand new Hudson cars, the same year, from the bookies,

for turning their back. Now, there's no graft available to anybody I'm afraid. At that time there was.

D.M: Is that the racetrack up on Gilmore?

A.S: It had nothing to do with the racetrack. It would be races that were run some other place. They would have been run in Laurel or San Anita or Kentucky or whatever. And you could bet, like in a house, which was illegal. It had nothing to do with this racetrack, usually. They would also take bets on this track, but that would be open, but they would take bets from all over. If you wanted to bet on a race in New York City, you could walk in and say here's 2 bucks, I want to bet on Mary B in the 3rd race in New York City. There used to be all kinds of them. There were all kind of bookie joints and they made money.

D.M: When would this have been going on?

A.S: On this scale? In the 30's. This cab driver, they found him dead out by the Old Fort, and the reason that he was dead was because he found a way to beat the bookies. He would, allegedly, sit outside the track, in his cab, with the motor running and as the horses just finished, he would have an accomplice up above, who had some way of telling him whether it was 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 that had won. He then would drive really quick to the closest bookie joint and have an accomplice in the window and as he drove past, he would give them the number. The post position time between the time the bookies closed their betting and the racetrack was a couple of minutes, he could get there in time, so he knew the winner and would bet. Apparently between the 3 of them, they made quite a bit of money. The bookies finally found out and decided they wanted it back and I guess he wasn't about to give it back and he didn't last to long. That's one of the few murders that I can ever remember in this town.

D.M: Do you remember any more?

A.S: Yeah, I can remember one that happened at Crystal Beach, a woman shot her husband in a jealous rage of passion, but that's..... But this kind of murder.... that's probably the only one I know of... in all this time , but that was an actual bookie situation. There was an awful lot of money made and lost in this town in bookie joints.

D.M: Tell me about the bootleggers.

A.S: What do you want to know about the bootleggers!

D.M: Oh, I don't know, what did they do?

A.S: Well, when it was illegal, that was Prohibition, there were several phases during Prohibition and the first phase was that... the American phase, you couldn't have anything alcoholic period. That was their phase. And the Ontario phase was you could have alcohol, but you couldn't sell it without a license and you could sell it under certain conditions and you could have it in your home. And then the next Ontario phase was that you couldn't do this and this but you could do that and as in my book* you couldn't.... there was no way you could sell any booze to the States. You couldn't sell it or take it. The net result of it all was that a lot of Americans, when they even wanted a drink of beer, would come over here. The hotel situation was such that they closed early or they weren't open on Sundays and a lot of other things. So there became a need for a place to drink other than hotels, and so that's what a bootlegger was. You'd either go and buy a bottle or buy a beer or you could actually go in that person's home and drink. There were all kinds of bootleggers in Fort Erie, literally all kinds, probably 50-60 maybe. And not all the same volume, but because of the American Prohibition, the way to make a buck was to make it available in Fort Erie, so people did, there were all kinds.

D.M: Didn't they try to take it across to the States?

A.S: Oh, sure. Absolutely. But that's going that way... by THEY, who do you mean?

D.M: The bootleggers.

A.S: Well that.... a bootlegger as such.... they were the people who sold it illegally here in Fort Erie, not the ones who took it across.

D.M: What did you call the ones who took it across?

A.S: The rumrunners or whatever. Some people might have called them bootleggers but they were in a little bit of a different situation.

D.M: Did many of them get caught?

A.S: Oh, sure.

D.M: What happened to them?

A.S: Well, there were people killed, were actually shot, during a battle, because a lot of them carried guns, if they had a big load of booze, they weren't going to lose it. So there were people that were killed. There were other people arrested, there were other people that got away and people that were shot. I told you about Peter Thompson, He was never arrested because they didn't catch him, but they

shot him but he got away. Or, somebody might dump it overboard and then when the Border Patrol or whatever pulled up, there was nothing on the boat and they couldn't do anything to them, cause there wasn't anything there. There's been alot of romancing about those days, too. It was a business like alot of others, and lucrative, very lucrative, if you were in at the right place. That's how old Joe Kenny made alot of his money.

D.M: As a bootlegger?

A.S: Yes. He had the sole distributership for, I don't know, I believe it was an Irish whiskey, and alot of it came through Canada and then in to the States to him, during Prohibition. John F. Kennedy's father, he made all kinds of bucks. Old Herb Guess, He had the property down here, died a few years ago, former mayor of the town. He was in the business, he used to legally, he said, and really he was sorta legal... he had... it was legal to ship it out of Canada.

D.M: To where, the States?

A.S: To anyplace, he was in it, it was legal to do it. It was not legal..... The States would not let you in with it, but it was legal to leave Canada, and what you did after that was illegal, but it was legal. So anything he did, was legal. If he met a boat out in the middle of the river on Canadian waters and transferred from this boat to that boat, he was morally violating the laws of the United States, but he was not violating the laws of Canada, so he said he was legal. That's up to each one to decide, and that's what he did. I got a cancelled cheque from Kennedy that he gave me for a load of booze he sold. It was big business, it wasn't just penny ante, an awful lot of money in moving liquor back and forth across the border, an awful lot.

D.M: I guess it all ended at the end of Prohibition.

A.S: Sure. No need to then. No need to.

D.M: Thanks for the interview!

A.S: Oh, you're welcome.

* Mr. Spear has written a book entitled " The Peace Bridge" which is avaiable for reading at the Fort Erie Public Library.