

This is Neil Flindall interviewing Mrs. Mary Graham in her home at 135 Battery Street, in Fort Erie, on the 20th of August 1985.

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

**M.G:** I first came to Fort Erie in August, of 1941...should I tell why?  
The teachers...the male teachers...were beginning to go into service, that is for World War Two...and there was an advertisement for a teacher...and my husband at this time had already gone into the service...and I didn't want to go to my mother with two small children so at that time I came to Fort Erie...it was...or should I say...the biggest problem at that time was trying to find a place to live... Fort Erie itself was much, much smaller...and there were no houses like out in the Garrison Road area...there was no Crescent Park...and Mather School was about the limit for the town...and we picked strawberries, where the...where that church is now, that would be the United Bretheren Church, and all along there...and back of Mather School was just meadow...there was no mall or no buildings along the Garrison... but there was the odd building, but it certainly was not a centre of any kind for business at all...the war time houses were just beginning to be erected...and there were at that time people who would call Fort Erie, Fort Erie...then Bridgeburg referred to the North End as Bridgeburg...and the west end was Amagari...and at this time they still spoke of these three places.

**N.F:** Even at that time?

**M.G:** Oh, yes.

**N.F:** Although that was some time after amalgamation.

**M.G:** Oh, yes it was, but they still spoke of it in that manner...and there were only at that time just four public schools...Mather, Douglas, Wintemute, and Rose Seaton...and no separate schools.

**N.F:** There were no separate schools?

**M.G:** No, there were no separate schools.

**N.F:** I've never had anyone mention that.

**M.G:** As a matter of fact the first separate school occurred after... and it was held in what had been the residence...the residence

for women workers at Fleet...a large wooden building on Central Avenue there...and the Nuns took it over...and I think it burned down...that is where St. Michael's is now...and they opened a separate school there...now before that...the Nuns came, I think about one or two days a week...at four o'clock in the afternoon, and taught the Catholic children...if the parents wished it...they were given instruction in our schools.

**N.F:** Is that right, they came into the public schools?

**M.G:** Yes, you see the Willicks, and the O'Hara's, and the Sullivans... all the people you know, that were Catholic and attended Douglas School...you see Mr. Sexsmith, he was the principal...and the school was run very differently from the schools now...every day...I don't think even you remember this but...the children were lined up outside waiting to come in at recess, and at nine o'clock in the morning...always in straight lines...and there was a loud victrol a in the lower hall...always he played marshall music...and the children marched in past teachers stationed at various points...Mr. Sexsmith was very, very interested in war...because he had been in the First World War...and I'll tell you the eleventh of November was always a production of war stories...war songs...war records... and they were very interesting...and not too many children had parents in the army, not in Fort Erie...you didn't see many uniforms but Fleet was the big thing...people came from all over to work at Fleet...both men and women...and there was a big influx of... well some of them were good, and some of them weren't so good... and they couldn't find places to live...I guess the hotels picked up in business a great deal...and then we didn't have to go out of the south end...you didn't need a car at all, you see there were two drug stores...Livingston's and Camm's...there were grocery stores... there were a lot of little grocery stores, Carose's, and two or three others whose names I can't remember, there was Thompson's up on top of the hill, where Beckers is now...and these grocery stores delivered, and of course you had credit till the end of the month...

and the milk came to your door...and the bread came to your door... and you could walk to anywhere for the things that you would need... oh, and Young's Store, you could buy almost anything you needed right there...and there was no Agrette's...that was just a little fruit stand...and I think that at the time it was nearer the Fisherman's Diner is now...of course that is now a Chinese Diner...and I'm sure the hotels were there, the King Edward Hotel...Young's building is still there but the Salvation Army Store is there now...and there was something next to that, an old house that was quite famous... it was almost a landmark...and when they tore it down they found an old Indian graveyard...the children came to school with knuckle bones, and bits of beads and such, it was very exciting...then the I guess archeological society came in and fenced it off...so there were no more souvenir takers...there wasn't a great deal of movement between the north end and the south end for quite a while... because there was a long stretch of nothing...see there was no library there, there was one chain store at the north end, and that was the A&P I think, but a lot of people didn't have cars, and gas was rationed...so once a week Mr. Sexsmith used to take me down there, along with his wife to buy some groceries...but most of the shopping was done at the smaller stores...then don't forget there was the Ferry...and the Ferry linked everyone with Buffalo...well I think it was ten cents for a round trip...and you could go across there in the summer especially and have a wonderful fish dinner, right down at the docks, and then come back...there was a lot of buying in the States then.

**N.F:** Was there much trouble with Customs at that time?

**M.G:** No, although for a while during the war...you had to have your picture taken and carry a identification card...but there really wasn't any trouble...and the money was almost at par...the saddest thing though I think is the destruction of the clean water...and there was good public transportation...I would take my children and go by a bus and go out to where the old dance hall is, really to Hetherington's

Store, and there were beautiful sandy beaches...and beautiful clean swimming there...and you could have a picnic...still the trees are there, but it is dirty and the water is unusable now...but at that time you could have a picnic there and get another bus home or walk.

**N.F:** It's hard to think of having better bus service at that time than there is now.

**M.G:** Well it was much better then...and of course busses went to Fleet... and busses went to Horton Steel...I think that really is the biggest difference, the river even was cleaner, well it looks nicer now... certainly the waterfront is much better...but there is far more garbage now than there ever was at that time...and the water was very clean...the children would go out to the old dance hall and jump off that old dock, that pier that was way out...it is partly destroyed now...and then they also had a pier there by Hetherington's Store...and I cannot remember if there was a hotel there at that time or not...because quite frankly we didn't go into those places so I don't know.

**N.F:** I suppose that you as a teacher then would have a public image also.

**M.G:** Well, I don't think it was that...I don't think that it was...drinking was done that much...and you had to have a good image, slightly, but they were never too strict...you weren't curbed too much... you would have to do something quite blatant before anything happened to you...but we just didn't go to the hotels...well I think that some of the people who came into town did...but I don't think the teachers did...I don't know for sure...and there was quite a contact with the States, far more than there is now, whether it was because it was so easy to go over there, by Ferry, I think that might be a big part of it...Fort Erie had...it was quite a problem to get a doctor during the Second World War...because Dr. O'Mulvane was here, he was pretty well the only one left...the one who used to be the railroad doctor Hammond went into the army, and I think Derbyshire could

have gone into the army also...I don't think there were any other doctors then...I remember Dr. O'Mulvoney being very annoyed at me for calling him once, when the children had measles...because he hadn't time to run around to see people who were not all that sick.

**N.F:** Is that right?

**M.G:** Oh, that was certainly right, I guess that was how busy they were... but finding a house was certainly a problem...and if it had not been for Mrs. Mabee...who had a lot of old houses fixed up and rented... and also the principal Mr. Sexsmith...I had an apartment in an old house, on the corner of Bertie Street and Stanton Street...it is all fixed up now...it is done in a funny kind of wood now...and behind it I finally got a small house to rent for myself and the children... but some of the teachers came to Fort Erie and lived in cabins for some time...and there weren't many cabins...these would be the Orchard Park Motel now...you know, out the Garrison...but they were in the country, really...that was the country at that time... and I lived there a week or two, so it really wasn't too bad...and the Queen Street United Church, that was open...there were a lot of kids went to Queen Street Sunday School...and Mr. Sexsmith was followed by Mr. Robertson...you should have had him...and then of course when Mr. Jackson came back from service in the Second World War...he took over that position...and those were the three principals that I had...and in all the time that I taught I only had the three principals.

**N.F:** That covers quite a span of years.

**M.G:** Yes, it certainly does.

**N.F:** That must be a good record for a school to have such a small turnover, like that.

**M.G:** Well yes, Mr. Sexsmith went to Rose Seaton School, and Mr. Robertson came in and then Mr. Robertson went to the new school...to be where Wintemute School was...and Mr. Jackson came back from the army...and then he filled the position of principal...but Miss

Everingham taught there for years and years.

**N.F:** Yes, she taught my father and she taught me also.

**M.G:** Well yes, I can imagine...I know that I taught many fathers and their children...quite a few as a matter of fact...but when it came to their grandchildren I thought that then it was time to quit...but it is hard to...I forget some times how much smaller Fort Erie was... because the war time houses...there were just a few of them up... there were none of these houses up on Murray...of course General Vanier School is new...and up by the hospital there were no homes... although there were a few homes up on the south side of Bertie Street, but none of the new ones, and Douglas Street was not built up yet, simply on one side, it was all open space...the kids had a wonderful time they were out playing all the time...and there were many little creeks that went through the town...and they played outdoors then much more that they do now...but there was no arena... it had collapsed...and there was a period of time before a new one was erected...some years they were lucky enough to have three weeks of skating in the school yard...but not very often...I'm trying to remember where the old Post Office was...and you know I simply can't...it seems like...the old library was there on Bertie Street, on Bertie Street below the hill...I think the old post office was somewhere over by the Legion Hall, there on Queen Street...but I forget...I know the post office on Princess Street but that is new...I should remember that being built...and I forget where the old one was...Miss Everingham may remember but I simply cannot...oh yes Sullivan's Fish and Chips... that was the place that you went to eat...when you ate out...and oh that was good food.

**N.F:** He must have been busy.

**M.G:** Well now, every Friday night...everybody went to Sullivan's for dinner...and it was good...I wish he would open up again.

**N.F:** A lot of people say that.

**M.G:** And the only Chinese restaurant I think was May Wong's, that used to be the hotel down on the Niagara Boulevard...the Niagara Hotel...

and it is gone now...and her children attended Douglas School... and the other Chinese restaurant was...well it was Happy Jack's uncle or whatever...it was a little restaurant...the New York Cafe I think it was called...it is the only other one I remember...and it was near Camm's Drug Store...and then Livingston's Drug Store was on the corner on the east side of the Niagara Boulevard...but I think maybe those are the biggest changes...the town now is so much bigger...but with so much less transportation available...and so many of the stores are gone...they are just gone...you cannot buy meat within walking distance of my home here now...there is Beckers but there is no meat that you would bring home to cook it is all cold cuts or frozen or like that...and Agrette's was within walking distance but now of course it is closed...well all of those little corner stores were very handy, and everybody knew everybody...now Fort Erie wasn't the friendliest place...you know what amused me very much...and it has amused everybody that I have spoken to also...they the people of Fort Erie consider anybody who came to Fort Erie, within forty or fifty years as a new comer... there were certain ones who were established...the Glenly's, the Rose's...I can't think of some other names...they still refer to them as the...the Nigh's I guess...the people who had lived here...but they speak of somebody as a new comer and then you found out that they had been here fifty years...but that has now changed, finally that has changed, although I couldn't tell you exactly when it happened.

**N.F:** That certainly is different.

**M.G:** That was always very amusing to me...and I couldn't get over the American accents when I first arrived here...I spent ages trying to get the children to pronounce properly...what and why and bread and doctor...those words all sounded so funny.

**N.F:** I wanted to ask you about rationing.

**M.G:** Oh yes, I'd almost forgot about all that...we were rationed, we had tickets, and that was for sugar, and butter and meat...those were the things that we had the tickets for...now I lived alone with two children...so I always had more sugar than I needed...we are not

sweet eaters...so I was able to trade sugar coupons for butter coupons I used more butter...and actually the meat coupons were better than immediately after the war...when suddenly the Americans came over here and bought the meat, and I mean a lot of meat... and Mr. Thompson would save some meat for his regular customers... or I don't think we would have had hardly any meat at all...rationing lasted I believe a short time, I had honestly forgotten about that... I can remember the storms we had...we used to get some really severe storms...where you had to wade through water almost waist deep to the nearest corner store to get anything that you might need...the milk wouldn't come to the house, but the delivery person would drop it off at the nearest store...and another thing I remember... rationing made me remember it...the children bought milk at school... well they were given milk at school and they paid for it in pennies... and it was a horrible job...once a week all these pennies when the milk order went in...and the other thing the children bought then was War Savings Stamps.

**N.F:** They were War Savings Stamps?

**M.G:** Yes they were stamps, and then so many stamps were equal to a certificate I think...well I forget exactly how it was done...but each room, that is each class vied with the others to see who could sell the most stamps...now a lot of the children...I really think the Second World War affected them less here, than anywhere else...it was close to the United States...and they didn't talk war until the United States joined in the war.

**N.F:** Is that right?

**M.G:** Well yes, that was the war to them...mainly because nearly everybody's parents were war workers at Fleet, or Horton Steel or somewhere, or they were American Citizens...and they didn't come into the same situation...and don't forget there was little television then...well there was no television then at all...so there was no way that that could be played up to them...and most things are from the States...I don't think there was a great deal of sympathy

at first.

**N.F:** That is hard to imagine.

**M.G:** Because you know...at one time in Buffalo there was the German Bund Organization, and of course that was a very pro-Nazi organization.

**N.F:** They did at one time have a very big movement over there.

**M.G:** And there was a great deal of fuss over there about that...and it wasn't until after the Second World War...or the closing of it...when refugees began to come over...it didn't seem to affect them...but now the rationing did...but I don't remember, oh, nylons were very hard to come by...they were just practically non-existent...and I don't think clothes were rationed but they were in short supply...and children's toys and bicycles were simply not to be found...you had to scrunge for a second hand bicycle or tricycle and of course second hand toys...because new ones weren't on the market.

**N.F:** All materials were going into war supplies.

**M.G:** Yes...now I really don't think that rationing and all that...that anyone suffered here during the war at all...in fact I believe that they had more money than they did before.

**N.F:** That could very well be.

**M.G:** There were new industries and new jobs...and so much new housing... I don't think that it was too severe at any time.

**N.F:** What would you have done for entertainment when you first came to town?

**M.G:** Well there were two movie houses in town then.

**N.F:** There were two operating at that time?

**M.G:** Yes there were, one at the north end, and one at the south end here the one in the north end was on Dufferin Street...and the one in the south end was on the Niagara Boulevard...and I think that they were both owned by the Ziff's, the Ziff family...and in the south end they were good movies...and they were quite cheap.

**N.F:** I didn't know that the south end was opened at that time.

**M.G:** Yes it was.

**N.F:** Do you remember a name for it at all?

**M.G:** No, I can't remember a name at all.

**N.F:** I can't either.

**M.G:** I do know that they had all the good pictures...and of course there was swimming in the summer, as I said, and I believe the beaches and the water where people swam was much cleaner than it is today, well, most people went to Buffalo...you went to Buffalo to concerts, you went to Buffalo to eat...you simply went to Buffalo...there were busses running to Buffalo summer and winter...it was a local bus line...Van Dyke I believe...oh the bus service was far better then, than it is now...and of course you played cards at people's houses... I don't think that there was half as much entertainment in the town...as there is now...people didn't go out like that.

**N.F:** There weren't as many restaurants around then at least in Fort Erie.

**M.G:** No, just the New York Cafe, and Sullivan's Fish and Chips...but then I don't think that people went out as much here...they went to Buffalo...over there you could go to nightclubs, and there were restaurants...and Buffalo was much nicer then than it is now... downtown Buffalo had some beautiful restaurants Pheiffers and Lobby's Old Spain...and you went there to those restaurants in Buffalo.

**N.F:** That would make sense, yes.

**M.G:** Well, it wasn't dull.

**N.F:** When you came to Fort Erie were the streets paved?

**M.G:** Yes and the strange part was way out past Mather School...they had expected Garrison to be the growth area...and the street leading out the Garrison was paved and yet there was nothing there but a hay field...and that was all...because when I walked in from what they called the old Orchard Cabins...you could walk all the way on the pavement...they put the pavement in, in hopes of a big expansion.

**N.F:** Fort Erie does go off on some tangents it would seem.

**M.G:** Well that is the way it was then, and finally it is growing now.

**N.F:** When did you first move to this location on Battery Street?

**M.G:** Oh, well we built this house in nineteen sixty-two...and this house was part of...and I think that this was an interesting property... at one time there was a big house there, on the south and east corner and the house is still there...and there was a carriage house, which faced on Battery Street...and where we are used to be the orchard... and that property covered the whole area, so I presume that it was a fairly wealthy family who lived in the house...but it was various people who lived here, the Honey family lived here for a while... but when we built this...Dr. Hayes, the Dentist lived there, beside us...you see Dr. Hayes had decided to build a house here, to leave the big one and build one on our property here...and then he went out to British Columbia and he liked it there so much...he came back and sold everything, went back to British Columbia, and we bought this lot and built here...before that we lived on Murray Street, we had bought a house on Murray Street...and I've never lived anywhere but here in the south end...for a while we thought of moving farther out, but then we would have needed to use a car so much...and the library was very close, you could walk to anywhere in this area, there were all kinds of stores...but it has changed quite a bit now.

**N.F:** It certainly has.

**M.G:** The population has grown except...it is very stretched out...I mean it is a far bigger area to grow to that number of people...the children, those people with younger children who would have attended Douglas School, they moved out of the area...and now at this point there seem to be younger families, with more children moving back into the area again...but then again now they bus the children...they have torn down Mather School which I feel was ridiculous, it was a modern school...and Douglas School they have torn down just recently...and all they needed to do at Douglas School, was add a library, a wing would have done it.

**N.F:** And they had all that land at both schools.

**M.G:** I feel that they have been short-sighted...no one seems to know what they are going to do with the properties.

N.F: You would have had a very close contact with the parents at the time.

M.G: Oh, yes we had a very active Home and School Association...and we always knew the parents, and I always knew before the year was up, where every child lived...but we did have a very close contact at that time with the parents.

N.F: I would imagine that would have helped quite a bit.

M.G: It did and the Home and School Organization was excellent...because it linked social life with the school, and then the parents with the children...that would keep the children much more involved...oh and I think the parents were more interested, no, I don't, the parents are still interested, but there are more that are not interested now, let me put it that way...I think that the teachers at one time could be very outspoken with the parents...and they are not supposed to be now...well a child at one time you could say he was really lazy...but now he would be insufficiently motivated...you are supposed to talk around it.

N.F: How did Fort Erie strike you when you first came?

M.G: Well I was born in Sudbury, but raised in Eastern Ontario...Fort Erie was hot in summer, and colder than I had ever been in the winter...because of the dampness, but terribly hot...and this is interesting, there was one child in my room, in one year whose parents were divorced...now almost all the children fit into that situation...and in the north there weren't any divorces...that was something that was quite new...and down here there were so many different names, German names and such and of course I was used to English or Scotch names and had a very difficult time with the pronunciations...that was quite different...I liked it, Fort Erie, I did find it a little insular, although we are not an island, and oh I'm still amused because people talk about going up north, and they go to Huntsville or somewhere, and we always thought north meant north of North Bay...and people here didn't travel much, now they do, but then they didn't...and there weren't many people until the Fleet that came from different places, other than that it was all people born and raised here, but that changed during the war years.

**N.F:** When you first came to Fort Erie from outside of the area did you find that you had any problems knowing your local politicians?

**M.G:** I haven't a clue...I don't even know who the politicians were...I don't even remember who the mayor was...oh and that is my fault...I taught our later politicians in school...I was a little interested in the National Democratic Party at one time...this is when they were fighting for our using the beaches, and for cleaner water...I remember that Jack Daley's brother was very involved...when I first came here I was too busy with two small children to be involved with politics...and I always had a difficulty getting baby sitters, they weren't called baby sitters then...but I had some good ones B. Nigh was one, a young one as a matter of fact...and then Mrs. Minor, the Minors were an old family in Fort Erie...I think she really wanted to keep an eye on her own grandchildren, and they lived next door...and so she was just like a grandmother to my children.

**N.F:** That would work out very well.

**M.G:** But that was rather a problem at that time...when I came here, mind you, the school was full, there were thirty-five to forty children in each class.

**N.F:** And that was from kindergarden on up?

**M.G:** That is right we had all grades...all the way from kindergarden right on up to grade eight...and let me tell you they behaved...I can remember two or three students being expelled...one for bad language...I think maybe they were too strict at that time...but now I think it is the other way.

**N.F:** You would have had a very close contact with the parents at the time.

**M.G:** Oh, yes we had a very active Home and School Association...and we always knew the parents, and I always knew before the year was up, where every child lived...but we did have a very close contact at that time with the parents.

**N.F:** I would imagine that would have helped quite a bit.

**M.G:** It did and the Home and School Organization was excellent...because it linked social life with the school, and then the parents with the children...that would keep the children much more involved...oh and I think the parents were more interested, no, I don't, the parents are still interested, but there are more that are not interested now,

**N.F:** It became more diverse.

**M.G:** But as far as the physical part the town was simply a small town, and they are much the same everywhere...I found it very convenient, at the time you didn't have much time to think about it, you are busy with the day to day things...and I had one child only a year old.

**N.F:** And still teaching.

**M.G:** Well, I had just started back...you see I hadn't taught for eight years...and women didn't teach then, you quit when you got married, you weren't allowed to teach, you could finish the month and then that was it.

**N.F:** Is that right?

**M.G:** No married woman, unless she were a widow, then she might be hired...well don't forget, just like now there was a terrible problem with employment and we were into a Depression...but when the war started, they suddenly needed teachers, and then for a while we were frozen in the job...yes at one time it was considered an essential, because so many were leaving for the services then... and your job was frozen.

**N.F:** It came full circle then, all the way around.

**M.G:** And now it is back to scarcity of positions...of course you see the salaries they make now...when I came here it was a thousand dollars a year.

**N.F:** It has gone up quite a bit since then.

**M.G:** Well it has gone up, but back then everything was cheaper...I think the most rent I ever paid was twenty-five dollars a month...and gas when we built this house everything was ten dollars a month, the hot water tank, stove, and all...and now it is fifty-eight dollars I think for the very same thing...and the water rates are dreadful now compared to what they were.

**M.G:** When I first came here everything was included in the rent except the electricity...then on Murray Street I think we paid water, but for goodness sake it was practically nothing...by the year it wasn't as much as one payment now.

**N.F:** Not as much for a year as it would be for one payment now.

**M.G:** Yes that is how it would compare...and I feel that is about all I can tell you.

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