

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
Transcription of Ann Stiles recording 2018.mp3
http://digiport.athabasca.ca/aasmp/people/a_stiles.htm

Narrator: Ann Stiles
Interviewer: Shirley Stashko
August 21, 2018

[Start of Interview]

Shirley My name is Shirley Stashko, and it is August 21st, 2018. Today I'm interviewing Ann Stiles in her dining room.

Ann My full name is Anna Alida Stiles. My maiden name was Alberts. My parents were Albert Alberts and Virginia (nee Cusson) Alberts. My husband's name was Leonard Stiles. I was born on March the 16th, 1927 right here in Athabasca.

Shirley So Ann, you wanted to start out by telling us about your maternal grandparents.

Ann Yes. My grandmother, Virginie (French for Virginia) Brouller was from Quebec. My grandfather, Adolph Cusson, was from Connecticut. But he had ancestors who had come from Quebec. And there's a mystery about how they met and we aren't sure. There are two possibilities. My grandmother may have been one of the girls who went down to the New England states to work in the cotton mills. They would stay with the nuns down there. And so she may have met him while she was working in the mill because he was working in the mill as well. The other possibility is that my grandfather, who loved to roam around the country, may have gone to Quebec to see where his ancestors had come from, and met my grandmother there. Who knows? My sister and I, later on, went to Quebec to where they had come from and went over to the church there to get the records they had. They had the record of my grandmother's baptism and her confirmation, but they had no record of marriage. Now, in those days, and being a religious woman as my grandmother was, I'm sure they got married somewhere. So if they didn't get married in Quebec, maybe they got married in Connecticut. Maybe he did come up there. Maybe he did meet her there and maybe they just eloped to Connecticut. From what I've heard about my grandmother, she was the type of person who might have done that. They moved through various parts of the New England states and ended up in New Bedford, Massachusetts. At that time, a union was being formed and there were clashes between the union and the cotton mills which sometimes got quite violent, and the mill owners hired thugs to meet up with the union people.

Ann And about that time some of the missionaries from Alberta went down there trying to lure French Catholics to come up to take up homesteads in this part of the country. And my grandfather seemed very, very pleased with the idea of no more wandering around. It sounded good to him, going up to a new country. So he and his two sons, Joe and John, came up in 1912. And they built a log house with a sod roof

on it. If you don't know what a sod roof was, it was sod that came off the ground and was used on top of some strips of log that were put over as a roof. And when it rained, you got the full blast of it.

Ann My grandmother and her three daughters came the next year, 1913. Now, just after they got here, they had one of the rainy spells and my poor grandmother just sat and cried and wished she was back in New Bedford. She adjusted, but not completely, to life as a pioneer. My mother, however, was a great homesteader. She worked outdoors just like a man would, and she was small, but she was strong.

Shirley And how about your paternal grandparents?

Ann My paternal grandparents name was Alberts. I really don't remember, I must've heard at some point, but I don't remember what their first names were. They immigrated from Germany to Chicago when my father was two years old. And they stayed in Chicago from that time until my father was 12. Over those years my father had quite an interesting time growing up there. In fact, he told stories. One was about one morning when he was going to school and there was a man driving a horse-drawn rig down the street and my father saw someone jump out from the sidewalk, jump on the back of that rig, and he shot that man, the rig driver. And I said to him when he told us that, "What did you do? Did you call the police?" "Oh, no." he said. "You didn't go to the police over something like that, or you might be the next target."

Ann Everybody in the family had to be doing something to help bring in a little bit of revenue. My father, being the youngest one, I think he sold some newspapers. But in the way of his work, he got a job that paid him a lot more than that. He could run and get buckets of beer for the brothel. And he said that the women in the brothel were very nice to him. When the weather was cold, they'd have him come in and warm up and they were very motherly. He never told his mother that he was working there because she would have made him quit. Now, when my father was 12, the family moved to Illinois, to a farm and then later on bought a farm in South Dakota, and that was where my father spent the rest of his growing up years.

Shirley So then how did your father get to Alberta?

Ann Well, he thought he wanted to see something. He didn't want to farm for one thing, and if he stayed there, he knew he was going to be farming and he wanted to see more of the world. So he decided to go wandering around. He went up into Saskatchewan for a while and then went to Calgary and then to northern Alberta.

Ann And somewhere, while he was growing up in Chicago, he learned to be a carpenter and that trade came in very well around Athabasca, because he worked building boats and building buildings as well. And, then he was standing by the railroad tracks, watching the train come in from Athabasca one night in Colinton. And this young woman came and got off the train and my father said to the man he was standing with, "That's the girl I'm going to marry". Someone said, "Oh, she has a sister who's even better looking." And he said, "I'm not interested in the sister. That's

the one I want." About that time, he got a job building a school just about a mile south of where my grandparents lived, and he got acquainted with my grandparents. And then he got to know my mother when she was coming home from work. She was always home for the weekends. They started going out together and six weeks later they were married.

Shirley That's pretty fast. So your father didn't want to be a farmer?

Ann No. But he did take up a homestead. You know, at that time you could get 160 acres of land for ten dollars, but you had to prove it up by having a certain amount cleared and some buildings built on it. But he didn't want to farm, but he did want to go moose hunting. So he found where there was some land available and really good moose hunting country, and there he got his homestead, near Colinton. It's a little south of where the school that I went to is, the school that he built. So he got his homestead, but he had no intention of working it. He was just going to keep it until as long as they would let him keep it and he and my mother lived there for a very short time, and then they decided that they would go back to the United States.

Ann So they went down to the United States and my father got carpentry work down there. Then when there was a baby coming along, my mother went and stayed with my father's sister and her husband while my father was working in Montana. And then later on, they and the baby moved back up to Alberta and he got a job doing carpenter work and stuff there. I think he was helping to build a bridge there. My mother decided that she would like to take a little trip home and show off her baby. So she got on the train with the baby and when she got off in Colinton someone whom she knew came up and said, "How did you find out so soon?" She said, "Find out what?" And he said, "Oh, you didn't know. Your father died." So that was not a very nice thing to come home to. And the trouble was, that left no one to take care of my grandmother because by that time my Uncle John had had a bad accident.

Ann He [John] and his brother Joe were going somewhere, across a field, and they had an old gun that somebody had sold them, lying on the floor of the wagon that they were driving. My uncle Joe was driving, and he saw a hawk. Now a hawk had been getting some of my grandmother's chickens, so he said to John, "Hand me that gun, I'm going to stop the horses and I'm going to shoot that thing." When John picked up the gun, it accidentally went off and shot Joe. And they had to take him to Athabasca in the back of a wagon over rough roads. And three days later, he died. My Uncle John could not bear that. He was so terribly traumatized by it, and he went back to the United States. My father bought my grandparents' farm. Even though he didn't like farming, somebody had to be there to take care of my grandmother. My parents had four children: Estelle, the one that was born in the United States, my brother Eddie, myself, and later on, when I was 12 years old, they adopted my brother Bob.

Shirley So can you tell us some stories about growing up?

Ann By the time I was born, my grandmother had died, but there was an elderly couple who lived just about a mile away across a field from us. And they were like

grandparents to me. Their name was Doucette. Napoleon Doucette, and I don't know what her first name was because, of course, you didn't call elderly people by their first names in those days. Mr. Doucette was a very outspoken sort of person. He grew his own tobacco. And his neighbors liked to come and visit him, and then they would bum some of his tobacco from him. So he found a way to deal with that. He took some poppy seeds and he mixed it in with the tobacco, and when they smoked it, they ended up going to sleep, so they quit asking him for tobacco.

Ann When he would go into town, he sort of enjoyed going and having a little drinking spree while he was all by himself there. One time he had been in town overnight and when he came home in the morning he had an old table that he had bought at an auction and he had that in the wagon. And so he told his wife that he had bought this as a present for her. She looked at the table and put her hands on it and said, "My old man, this table's a little like you today, a little bit shaky."

Ann Visiting Athabasca was always a treat to me as a child. It didn't happen very often because we lived 17 miles away, and of course you went by horse and whatever—a cutter or a wagon box or something like that. So it wasn't a ride that you took all that often, but I loved to go to Athabasca. Mostly I liked to go and have a ride on the ferry just for fun, but since I wasn't very old, my brother had to come along with me, which he did not like. There was no bridge across the river at Athabasca at that time, and there was a ferry that went across the river and back. In the wintertime they had a cage which was pulled across the river by pulleys, and you were well up above the river. I never rode in that, and I don't think I would ever have wanted to, but I did like to ride on the ferry. It took horses and wagons. It was quite big and it was free.

Shirley Can you talk about some of your memories of what the town of Athabasca looked like when you were growing up?

Ann It was quite different than it is today. Some of the places that I remember was the old Imperial Bank of Commerce, and it was a very, very classic looking building. It stood there up until the present bank was built many, many, many years later. Another thing they had around that time was the creamery. Now from the creamery, men went out with a truck or something and picked up the cans of cream that the farmers had and brought them in and then the creamery made butter out of the cream and sold the butter.

Ann Athabasca over the years had hospitals at four different sites. The first one, which I don't remember—I never saw it—was up the hill from the present Roman Catholic Church and the nuns were running the hospital. That's the one that burned down. I think it burnt down fairly early on, about like 1920 or something. Then there was the hospital that I remember, where I had my tonsils out and where my sister had her appendix out. It was at the corner of 49th Street and the 49th Avenue. After that, they built another hospital, just up the hill west of the Burger Bar. And then the present hospital, which is up in Cornwall.

Ann Another building that I remember quite well was Parker's store. It was a dry goods store and people today probably don't know what a dry goods store was. They didn't sell any groceries or anything like that. They sold a few tools and clothing, that sort of thing. And the Parkers had the store, and they had an upstairs on that building, which they made into a hall for movies and dances.

Shirley What do you remember about the Union Hotel in those days?

Ann Well, I never saw the old Union Hotel because that burned down in 1912 or something, and so I just saw the one that is there now, and I can remember that it was far grander than it is today. It had a big rotunda with a lovely big stone fireplace. It was quite nice and there was a very nice dining room with lovely linen tablecloths, napkins and all, so it was the place to go and eat.

Shirley Do you want to talk a little bit about going to a country school?

Ann Okay. The school that I went to as a child was the one that my father had built just a mile away from home. It was called Atlanta School. And that's where I took all my grades from one to nine. And then when I was ready for high school, my sister was working as a teacher. She had become a teacher and she was teaching out near Vimy. She said to my mother that if she could find a place where I could board around Vimy, I could come out and spend weekends with her and take my high school in Vimy. And that's what I did. I have very fond memories of being there.

Ann It was so nice to be on my own at 15 years of age. Yes, and weekends, on Fridays I would ride along with some kids who lived about halfway between Vimy and where my sister was teaching. I'd ride with them and then I'd get off and walk the rest of the way to the school where my sister was teaching. She had a teacherage upstairs above the school and the stairs creaked. And I remember one time she had gone somewhere, and I was alone there and it was so spooky. I was so glad to see her get back. After that I went to Edmonton and finished up my high school there.

Ann And then I took teacher training at the Normal School in Edmonton. Normal school was a teacher training school, it later became part of the university. But at that time, it was separate from the university. This was during the Second World War and so there was a real teacher shortage because so many young men who had been teaching, and some of the women too, had joined up in the armed forces. So they wanted to get teachers out just as quickly as possible. You spent eight months in a normal school and then you were a teacher. And I think the only thing I really learned about teaching at that time was how to keep the school register properly. The rest you had to pick up from experience.

Ann I began teaching in 1945. We got out of normal school early in May and in that time, since there was such a teacher shortage, there had been smaller schools. Schools with smaller registration had been taking correspondence and they had a correspondence supervisor who wasn't a certified teacher. Most of them had their high school, or part of it at least. I went to one of those schools and it was a small registration. There were only nine students, and only one of those was a boy. And

that boy was Gene Kowalchuk. The school was called Greyville, and it was across the river from Athabasca and a few miles out. I lived in a little teacherage there which was just sort of a cabin. It had a bedroom and another room and was separate from the school. It had a wood stove. Gene was the janitor as well as a student, so he was in charge of keeping the school warm and clean.

Shirley So how did you like being at Greyville?

Ann It was lonely. I didn't have a car. And although there was a well beside the teacherage, the water was no good anymore, because it hadn't been cleaned out for years, so I had to walk a quarter of a mile to get a bucket of water from the neighbors for drinking.

Shirley Do you remember what your salary was?

No, I remember it was pretty good wages for that time. But certainly a lot less than teachers get these days. But of course, we didn't have to go through all that schooling that they have to go through now.

Ann So I just stayed there until July. And then the next year, I went to the school in Winding Trail, which is out west of Baptiste Lake. Now, first, I rented a house that was close to the school, but it was cold and it was full of mice. In fact, one night when I was correcting some papers, I was sitting there and a mouse ran up my leg. So I wanted to get out of there and I got permission from the school board to curtain off one corner of the school room. And that's where I lived for the rest of that year, without mice. In fact I had a cat, to make sure. I was at Winding Trail for one year, and then I went to Nestow which is near Clyde. The name of that school was Allbush, which was a very, very descriptive name, it was out in the bush. It wasn't very far from Nestow. You could walk. It was a mile and a half away. So you could walk down there to get groceries and see some people. It was not so isolated. I stayed there for two years.

Ann And then, toward the end of that second year, I had a friend who was teaching school up in Smith. And I went to visit her and there I met a very, very nice young man. My friend who was teaching up there wasn't really looking for a boyfriend because she was engaged to somebody here around Athabasca. But this young man had a movie projection outfit. And so he would go from one place to another to show movies, but he was living in Smith. So my friend introduced him to me, and we went out to a movie that he was showing out at Fawcett Lake. Then I went home for the summer holidays, but I couldn't get him off my mind, so I wrote him a letter. And lo and behold, within just about a week and a half I had an answer back, and he told me later that he never answered a letter so fast in his life. And the next year, in July of 1948, Len Stiles and I were married.

Shirley Can you tell us a little bit about the movie business and how that worked?

Ann Oh, well, it was always in the hall or school and there was a portable movie projector. Most places didn't have electricity at that time. So Len had, in the back of

his car, it was a great big old Stutz, he had a little engine in there that produced electricity for the movie, except for, well, Slave Lake, I think, had electricity so we didn't need it there. But some of the smaller communities, Jousard and places like that, you needed that little generator there. We would come home to sleep every night and then go out the next day to a different town. It was interesting, but it didn't bring in very much money, of course.

Ann My husband had his mechanic papers and he had his electrician papers. He got a job for Swanson Lumber Company in Chisholm. So then we moved to there. We had a wonderful life in Chisholm. It was a little sawmill town and planer mill town. It had been a sawmill town, but the sawmill had been shut down and they just used the sawmills that were out in the bush. They were different. The lumber came in from the mills that were out in the bush and they planed it there at the planer mills in town. And during the war it had been a very, very busy place and had both the sawmill and the planer mill and a box factory. And they actually made boxes, wooden boxes. And there had been quite a few more people there then than when we were there by that time, but there were still enough people that it was quite a viable community. It was a great place to live, especially for kids. They got turned out in the morning and called in for meals, but everybody kept an eye on them.

Shirley How many children did you and Len have?

Ann We had four children. We had Lynn, who, sadly, passed away with cancer when she was 44 years old. And we had Ned, my only son, who is still around. And Joanne, who now lives out on Vancouver Island, and Laurel, who lives in Grand Cache. So the girls haven't stuck around home very well. Ned lives in Westlock. After Chisholm we moved to Smith. We had a service garage a little way outside of Smith. And that was a good place to live. We lived there until 1973 and then we moved to Athabasca.

Ann Now, in the meantime, Len had added to his work as a mechanic by having a vending business. The vending machines sold cigarettes and various other goodies and games, like pinball. And he had those in several different places, including Athabasca, and that became his living. When we moved back to Athabasca we had this house built for us by Bob Richards and I've been here ever since 1973.

Shirley And what did the neighborhood around here look like when you first moved here? Were there very many houses up here?

Ann No, there sure weren't. There was one house right next to us, and then there was another house that got moved in on the other side of that one. There were two houses down on the edge of the hill as you're going down toward the town, and shortly after we were here, there was one house built across on 54th Street. And that's all that was there, so it was almost like living in the country out here. Where the kids' park is now it was kind of marshy and I remember the girls gathering some frog eggs there. But then once it started to get populated, it happened very fast and in no time it was all built up.

Shirley So over the years you've done a number of things besides being a teacher. At one point you had a column in the local newspaper.

Ann Yes, and when we first came to Athabasca, I had a hobby shop for about five years. It was located on 49th Street, the building that the Fertigs own now - Athabasca Video. I sold all sorts of hobby things, but I think the best seller was models for kids to build. There was a flock of little boys of about 11 or 12 to about 15 who were really into the model business.

Ann I've always been interested in writing. I wrote a bit of poetry every once in a while and a few other things. The local newspaper, the Advocate, was looking for somebody local to write a column, and at that time I was a member of a writing group, and so we were approached to see if somebody wanted to do the column. I thought that might be a good idea. So I wrote for a couple of years. It was just for the paper in Athabasca. And then the Advocate became part of the publishing group called The Town and Country so I started writing for Town and Country instead, and that went to, I think, four different places. I enjoyed it for about four years or so and then I was told that they were changing the format of the paper and there wasn't going to be room for my column anymore. I found out later that that really wasn't true. The format of the paper did not change in the least and I had just been replaced by someone else. I never knew the reason, never found out.

Shirley What did you write about in your column?

Ann Everything. There was some politics, though not nearly as much politics as I see in there now. There were stories, you know, from older times, stories about things and commentary on things that were happening in the world at the present time, that sort of thing. A little bit of everything.

Shirley I know that your column was very much loved.

Ann And I enjoyed doing it.

Shirley You're a good writer. And you're still writing letters to the editor.

Ann Thanks. Yes, I do.

Shirley You also had another little enterprise. I did which I still do to a certain extent.

Ann When the University moved to Athabasca there were a lot of people who were working up here just for maybe two or three days during the week. And yet they lived mostly in Edmonton. And so they needed someplace to stay during the time they were up here. So I started having a sort of bed and breakfast. They stayed in my house and they had breakfast here. The rest of their meals they looked after themselves. I really enjoyed that. I met so many interesting people. I still do rent out rooms and, mostly, it's been people from the University, but sometimes others as well.

Shirley You were a member of the local writers' club for a number of years. You like to write poetry, and I think you've chosen a couple of poems that you'd like to recite for us now.

Ann Yes, these are some of my favorites. The first one is called Pretender.

"My space within the mirror was usurped
by a staid woman with the time worn face,
crow's feet above the eyes,
and a neck like poultry newly plucked.
Body with such sagging rolls and folds as I could never own.
When did she come?
I'm sure she was not there when I looked yesterday.
You, with your ravaged self and your propriety.
You are not me, for I'm invulnerable to time."

Ann This is a poem in memory of my grandmother, who was a reluctant pioneer in 1912.

"What were your thoughts, Virginie,
as you closed the door and looked one last time
at the home where happiness dwelled?
Did the tears flow,
as you boarded the train to the west,
bidding a final adieu
to those you were leaving behind?
Riding wagons through the mire
on the old homestead trail,
where you stirred by the summer beauty
you saw in this land?
Or did your heart quake
at the wilderness closing you in?
What did you feel
at the sight of your pioneer home?
Little log cabin built by your husband and sons
from the trees that they felled?
Chinked with the mud
that in copious measure was found.
Roofed over with sod
that once covered the soil at your feet
Was the joy of reunion
sufficient to outweigh the pain,
as you thought of the home
and the life that you left in the east?
Did you hold firm, Virginie,
as you saw the still form of your son
in his young manhood struck down
by a cruel twist of fate?"

Did you pray as your husband grew weak,
overtaxing his strength?
Did your heart break
as you laid him at last to his rest?
Tired, and sick and dependent on others for care.
Where was the blame
if your bitterness sometimes showed through?
Rest, Virginie.
Rest by the side of your love.
Cold northern winds
may blow o'er the field where you lie,
but your spirit has flown
from this land where you never belonged,
back to the city you loved
by the great eastern sea."

Shirley Well, Ann, it's been really enjoyable talking to you, and thank you very much for your sharing all your memories with us.

Ann Thank you for a very nice interview.

[End of Interview]

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