

## Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

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### Transcription of Arno Birkigt - 0001.mp3

Narrator: Arno Birkigt  
Interviewer: Heather Stocking  
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[Start of Interview]

**Heather** It's July 30th, 2022, with Arno Birkigt and Heather Stocking.

**Arno** I want to begin by talking a little bit about my father, who was born in 1898 in Chemnitz, Germany. A little sidetrack here, he fought in the First World War for Germany, and after the war he'd seen enough misery to last him a lifetime. In 1928, he came to Canada on the Duchess of Bedford, him and a very good buddy of his.

I'm going to digress here and say that my mother was born in 1921 in Edmonton, and she fought in the Second World War for Canada. But her father fought in the First World War for Great Britain. So I kind of grew up in a detente situation, and it was really quite interesting, with some very different opinions. There was 25 years difference between the age of my mother and father. And so, you know, my being here is nothing short of a miracle to start with. I've always kind of laughed about that, and maybe that's why I'm kind of laid back and don't get too excited about things.

**Heather** Are you the only child?

**Arno** No. I had an older brother who was four years older than me, and he passed away at the very beginning of the pandemic from unknown causes. That was my brother, Pat.

In any event, my mother, who grew up in Edmonton, they were living in the Riverbend area. At that time the kids would play at the riverbank, and one day a child drowned there, and my grandfather said "That's it, we're moving." And they moved into an inner part of Edmonton, and later they moved to Rochester. My mother walked, as a child, from Edmonton to Rochester, because there were eight in the family, and my mother was the second oldest. The babies got to ride in the wagon and she walked.

That walking is something that was almost a trademark of my mother. I would say that her right foot was almost hitting the ground and the left foot was coming off. She was an incredible walker. An example was that when the original swimming pool was built in Athabasca, my mother and Walter Christensen walked from the other side of Westlock to Athabasca as a fundraiser, and they were the only two that made it. And, after she did that walk, she went golfing the same day. Her only complaint was she had a little wee tiny blister on her foot. But I kind of digressed there a little bit.

**Heather** Do you know why they moved to Rochester?

**Arno** They homesteaded there, and it was just the land was dirt cheap. I think it was \$2 for the quarter. I think now that's probably a \$200,000 quarter. A little bit of inflation over that time. My mother left Rochester to join the Air Force and she was never overseas. She was in Canada at some of the training bases and things like that. Hence, I think some of the different perspective on war that she had with my father.

So after my father came to Canada, him and his friend Walter Bruchhausen came to the end of the rail line, which was Athabasca and the immigration station, and they worked for farmers. There were other immigrants around. They headed out trapping in the wintertime. They would go downriver and there was actually quite a little German community down there. And a number of folks, Dick Neuman, Ernst Feuereisen and such, and I can't remember all their names, but it was really quite a community.

**Heather** Was he bilingual when he came to Canada?

**Arno** No. He learned English when he came to Canada. He had a trapline down river, but he would also fly into isolated lakes and be dropped off for the year, or for the trapping season, and be picked up or walk out. Somewhere, I think it was in the 1930s, it could have been in the 40s though, he was dropped off the plane that was flying him in. They'd hit a bit of a snowstorm, an early snowstorm. So they landed on a lake and the pilot was in a real hurry to get out of there. And what had happened is his axe was left on the airplane. He spent the winter in a complete survival mode. The axe was actually tucked in behind the seat of the airplane. It's where the pilot put it. And what he did is, he had shot some caribou and laced the hides together, and then filled them with spruce boughs and kind of let them dry and made sort of a tubular structure by taking the branches out. And he could drag that structure kind of through the brush and he could get to where there were little twigs and small bush that he could cut with his knife to keep a fire going. And he would light a fire at one end of the tube, crawl into it and sleep, and then he could move on. If it was a longer journey, he'd thaw it out and roll it up and take it. Otherwise, he would just drag it and skid it along, sort of an early mobile home.

But, when he walked out into Fort McMurray, this was in the Birch Mountains, he walked out, and he left his firearms there. All he carried with him was his .22 because he just didn't want to wait. And when he reported in at Fort McMurray, they were very surprised that he'd come out alive. So that was probably a pretty harrowing ordeal to go through because winter was long.

**Heather** They make movies about less. That sounds fascinating. That's tough living.

**Arno** Yeah. I had heard the story many times, and I still get choked up.

So after the trapping, my father did some trucking. Then I think it was somewhere around 1946, the proprietor of the old trading post, his name was Hingley, last name Hingley, I can't think of his first name, died. The fur-buying business was actually owned by Sheppe Slutker from Slutker Fur and Hides in Edmonton. So he asked if my father would be interested in taking over the business. And my father was. So he became a dry goods, sporting goods and fur buyer. So he needed a clerk and he was referred to my mother, who was Rita Murphy at the time and living in Rochester. It was the store owner in Rochester, his name was Walter Gerlach, who referred my father to what would soon be my mother. So he showed up out there and they didn't know who he was. He introduced himself and my mother took the job and she came in. She lived with a woman by the name of Mrs. Bell, a very old-time citizen of Athabasca, and she worked in the store and she kind of liked it and she always said there was no chance of promotion. So I had to marry the boss. I always thought that was the kind of sense of humor that my mother had. So they were married in '47, I believe.

At that time, fur was king and things really, really went well for them. And they bought some land north of the river and we developed a farm out there. And after 1953, we had eight quarters of land owned just north of the river. And it was funny, as my father was the storekeeper and my mother was the farmer because she just loved farming. But in 1963, my father passed away from a heart attack and my mother kind of made a choice about being on the farm or being in the store, because she couldn't do both. And she didn't like the idea of leaving her sons alone on the farm at 10 and 14 years old. It wasn't going to happen. So at that point we moved into town and kept running the store.

**Heather** Did she sell the land?

**Arno** Yeah, you know, the land was sold, and that's a whole different story, and I'm not going to get into it

There were a few interesting stories that I recall, and one was that when the ferry got away that was crossing the river, the cable broke. And if it drifted away downstream, my father always had a boat and he went downriver and moored the ferry, caught it and towed it in and anchored it. And then later they drug it back up. I think they drug it up along the bank with horses, if I remember the story correctly, because there is no other way really to get it out. That was kind of interesting.

Another kind of interesting story of the river was I mentioned Hingley, the previous proprietor of the old trading post, but he didn't trust banks. And he would hire my father and his boat to go downriver, and he would take his cash and anything that people had pawned of significant value. And he would go down and my father would drop him off at a certain point, go across the river and wait. And after varying periods of time, Hingley would come out and he would whistle. My father would come over with the boat and pick him up and they'd go back to town. And the same thing when he needed to retrieve stuff from whatever his cache was downriver, he would be dropped off. Father would go across the river and wait, and then he'd whistle and they'd come back. So there is a

treasure in the banks of the Athabasca River down below the townsite here. I don't know if you've ever heard that.

**Heather** No, never.

**Arno** I know, like, I can't remember who it was, but someone had their wedding rings in that pawn that is in the riverbank here somewhere.

**Heather** Oh, and he died or whatever?

**Arno** He died. And he had no record of it. Like, nothing. It's gone, unless somebody found it years ago. Who knows?

So that's kind of an interesting story. But the old trading post was a real gathering spot. It was the coffee shop without the coffee, the base station of Athabasca. Very frequently, or generally, the men would come in and do their quick shopping and then go over to the store to stand around and be with everybody because it was the BS center, you know. The stories about how the crops were doing, about just everything. The state of politics, the state of the world, everything was covered there. You became an armchair philosopher, and, you know, you just sat back and listened to the yarns that were told, and the jokes.

It was a real time of community in this store. And Saturdays were the day for it because the cream cheques had come in and so people had \$8 to \$12. And they could buy their groceries or clothing and things like that in the store. We also gave grubstakes to many, many trappers and people going into the lumber camps. We'd front them with the clothing and when they got paid they'd always come out and square up with us. It was really good.

One of the interesting things about that system, I think it was about 1971, a native fellow walked in the store and said, "Mrs. Hans," because my mother was known as Mrs. Hans to the native community, "I owe you \$27.50." And he laid it on the counter. And my mother said "I don't know." She said he said, "Oh, no, you didn't loan it to me. Your husband loaned it to me." And he said, "I have not had any money until I got my Old Age pension." And he said, "This is my first pension cheque and I'm paying this bill." So he came in and he gave my mother the money. And she went through the files and there was absolutely no record of it. And he was absolutely adamant that he owed this money.

**Heather** So it was several years between, obviously.

**Arno** Close to thirty years.

**Heather** And he had that weighing on him that whole time.

**Arno** Yeah. It's pretty incredible. And the integrity of the individual to come back, because he had a very large family and life was really, really tough for him and his family. But it was just so important for him to square that debt. My mother, she actually managed some people's funds for them. They would leave their money with her and when they needed money, they'd just stop in and she'd give them their money and have accurate records, and never charged anybody anything for it. But she was just reliable and helped people. That's kind of what she did. Her philosophy in the world was, if you can help, help. If you can't, get the hell out of my way.

You know, it was interesting times back then. You'd have people coming in and they would, in a box of rifle shells there's 20 bullets, but they didn't have the \$5 to buy the box. So my mother would split boxes and sell them. She wouldn't sell less than five shells because she felt that you needed that for your own safety. But she would split these boxes of shells for people, 30-30 was the caliber that would always be split. But, you know, someone would come in and buy five shells and frequently they'd come back in a couple of days and have five beaver to sell and buy the rest of the box. And, you know, it was like it was just kind of a really interesting way of doing business.

I think just about every farm boy and a lot of farm girls too, that are in, say, in their 70s today or well, 60s, had sold fur to my mother because she became the fur buyer too, after my father passed away. So kind of interesting. In the '60s, the later '60s, the store had a bit of a resurgence due to the American hunters. There was a big influx of American hunters coming up for moose hunting, and the guys would bring the hunters into the store. My mother would open the store for them many times so they could get their stakes that they needed to go out to the bush and go hunting. So it was kind of an interesting time, too, where you saw a local economic boom from hunting.

**Heather** So, the furs. The hunter would go out, go to the trapline, whatever, shoot them. Like you said, they'd come in and they were skinned. Right? And then they were cleaned or they all had to be cleaned and such?

**Arno** Well the trappers would either trap, snare, or shoot the fur-bearing animal. They would clean the hides and dry them. And my mother only really bought dried hides and they would then be bundled up and shipped into Edmonton to Slutker. Now I can remember peanut sacks, they're about three times the size of a gunny sack, being stuffed full of squirrel hides and/or beaver hides or whatever. And in those days, they went in by train and you'd have to, we had to wax seal them, and put little clips in them, and get them down to the train station and they'd be shipped in. And then later, the bus was used, and sometimes we would just drive them in. But driving to Edmonton was pretty much a four-hour trip and you could count on, you know, probably getting stuck, but for sure you'd be covered with dust two- or three-quarters of an inch thick and then you had to come back. So there was a bit of an adventure too. But, fur-bearing animals and selling the furs was a mainstay for so many people, and a supplement for so many farmers. During the winter months there wasn't a lot they could do if they weren't working in a lumber mill or something like that.

**Heather** So were there different grades of the fur?

**Arno** Oh, yes, each pelt was individually handled and graded separately. Beaver pelts, for instance, they were all measured by their size and they went into different categories from small, medium, large, extra large, and super blanket. So, the prices varied accordingly. The coyotes, lynx, they were all graded by their fur quality and the markets were really big back then. They would ship to Europe. It was huge. And the prices, I think, were higher then than they are today because of the fur market collapse and we've switched over to a synthetic world. So, the fur business, my mother again, with her sense of humor would say it's a skin game. But there would be, you know, probably 100s or 1,000s of squirrels that would go through in a season, go through our store. And then, you know, we also picked up a lot or bought a lot of moccasins and mukluks and things like that and then resold them. You know, in those days, a pair of moccasins was about \$5.25. That same pair of moccasins today would run you probably \$200 or \$300.

**Heather** So that must have been, well, your dad would have taught your mom how to grade the quality of furs or something.

**Arno** I think she would have picked it up right along beside him there when he was buying fur, because it was just who she was. You gotta get in there, you gotta be part of it, and you learn by doing and, you know, that's how you learn.

So it was a symbiotic relationship between the store, the trappers, and the community. If you needed help, you could get help. And there was reciprocity. The reliable, good customers would come back and pay their bills, and it just kept going. So it was a very interesting time and kind of gave you a lot of faith in people, which was really nice.

**Heather** So it was located on 49th Street?

**Arno** Right. How do you know I'm from Athabasca? Because I don't know [laughs]. Its right where Warehouse One is, and it was a really tiny little structure. I thought it was huge as a kid, but I spent so many days, and hours, and years of my life in that store, and, you know, being a young, rambunctious boy, my mother would always figure out ingenious ways to keep us occupied. And one of the interesting things that she came up with is that she had us collect rocks, good sized rocks, and we put them in a cardboard box and we'd wrap them all up and label them as parts. And then take them out and set them out on the street and just drop it, and see who's interested in picking them up. And so we'd be entertained with watching who would pick it up and what people would do with it. It was a social science experiment, I think, that we were running.

So we used to have great fun with that as kids. But then one day I got a call or my mother got a call, and there was this big parcel at the post office for me and I couldn't imagine what it was. So here I am, I'm all excited, and I go charging three-quarters of the block up to the post office. And there's this huge box there and I get it. It weighs a ton. It's all I could carry, and I carry it back to the store and I plunk it down and I start to open it up. And here is a great big box of rocks. So I think the community had had

enough of me and my rocks, and that kind of put a stop to that. And the store was full of people at the time when I was ripping it open and everybody just roared.

You know, my mother's favorite story was there in the store. There was probably eight or ten guys standing around, BSing, and talking about things, and this woman comes in and she buys a pair of men's armbands.

**Heather** Like the ones that hold sleeves up?

**Arno** So she pays for them, and now there's eight guys standing around and it's in the '50s you got to remember. She kicks off her shoes, hikes up her dress and pulls these armbands over her foot to haul, using them as garters. These eight guys were standing there with their mouths open, and my mother was standing there in shock and probably still in shock [laughs]. And she pulled them on, put on her shoes and said "Thank you." And out the door she went, then never saw her again. My mother never knew who she was. And my mother said the guys just stood there. They didn't know what to say.

In all the years that my mother bought furs, everything was paid for in cash, too. So she always had a lot of cash around. There was only one time that she ever had any kind of an altercation. There was a fellow that was impaired came in, and he had what I would call a green beaver, which is a raw beaver that's just been skinned, not dried, and was insisting that my mother buy it from him. And she said, "No, I can't deal with that. I'm not buying it." And he made the mistake of grabbing her hands. Well, she belted him as hard as she could and flattened him. And the guys that were standing out in the front of the store heard the commotion and came running in and grabbed him by his heels and skidded him out the door. And some of his relatives came by and they were laughing about it and said, we told him never touch Mrs. Hans. So he kind of learned that lesson the hard way.

But the store was the meeting point for so many people. I just keep coming back to that, and it was an unofficial community service, I think.

**Heather** And where did you guys live? At the store or something?

**Arno** Actually, we bought the house that was right beside the post office. Oh, it's no longer there. It's where the health food store is right now. So that's where we lived in a little house. So it was all very, very close. Quite convenient.

**Heather** Your mother never remarried?

**Arno** No. She had a couple of male friends that she hung out with and she loved to dance. She'd go to the Legion just about every Saturday night. Oddly enough she never drank, but she would go there to dance and dance. Her other passion was golfing. She was an excellent golfer. Well, she's very athletic.

**Heather** It sounds like it.

**Arno** I can remember, later on, coming out of school and going down to the store and she said, "Here's the keys. I'm going golfing. I've been here all day." Well, I've been in school all day. "Yeah, I know. So you could stay in the store now, it's a change." And off she'd go.

It was good, and it actually taught me responsibility at an early age. Like this might flabbergast you, but in the early '60s, I would frequently go to the bank and cash the draft for my mother and walk from the bank back to the store with \$1,000 cash on me as a, you know, 13-year old, which, at that time, was an incredible amount of money. But on the other hand, it was pretty safe too. But, you know, you did what you did back then.

**Heather** It was a much smaller town then, too.

**Arno** Yeah, a little smaller. Not as much housing, you know. I was reflecting the other day that my friend and I, my friend lived up on what was the high school hill, and we'd often go squirrel hunting and we were probably 14, 15, something like that. Not old enough to drive for sure, but we'd walk. He'd walk down carrying his .22 on his back down to me, where I lived by the post office, pick me up, and then we'd walk out of town across the river carrying our .22s. And frequently people would pick us up and give us a ride, and, you know, it was completely normal.

Nobody thought anything of it, and we'd be dropped off and we'd spend a day out squirrel hunting or something like that. And then walk back and same thing, walking down the highway, coming back, people would sometimes pick you up, sometimes you'd walk.

**Heather** Yeah, if you saw someone with a .22 now?

**Arno** Walking through town, you'd kind of...

**Heather** Hit the gas. Oh, yeah. But it's a different world.

**Arno** It was completely different. Like, so different. And, you know, there wasn't the level of gun violence, or if there was gun violence, it was, usually quite fatal.

**Heather** Or stranger danger. You know, I was trying to tell my grandson, I said when I was little in Barrhead I knew every crack in every sidewalk. Because you'd just be out and my grandma would say, "Okay, it's time to go to swimming." And I would walk, you know, downtown to the little swimming pool. And I couldn't let him wander like that now.

**Arno** Yeah, it's very, very different, isn't it? Well, you know, we used to be out all the time, too. And the downtown neighborhood had quite a few houses and a lot of young kids there. You know, the old Kremer family lived down there and another friend, Jeff Soroka, his family was the shoemaker. So you know a lot of kids out there and well it was a very, very safe community and I never thought anything of it.

So I don't know. I think that sort of wraps it up. Is there anything?

**Heather** Nothing that really jumps out. So I guess what I could say is, so you went to university?

**Arno** Right.

**Heather** And what did you take?

**Arno** I have a degree in anthropology and minor in psychology.

**Heather** Okay. How do those two go together?

**Arno** Fairly well. What makes me take it? What makes us all tick? I also kind of have minors in chemistry and physics, too. How do all of those go together, right?

**Heather** Yeah, exactly.

**Arno** Yeah, I went to university in the early '70s to the U of A, and a good thing I did, because that's where I met Elaine, my wife.

It's interesting because for a very, very short period of time and I say this now in light of the reconciliation and the recent Pope's visit, but I worked for Indian Affairs as a WP2, which translates as an Indian agent. I worked in High Prairie, and I covered Wabasca-Desmarais, Trout Lake, Peerless, all little fly-in communities back in the mid-seventies.

I'll be honest, it was a job I didn't particularly enjoy. I enjoyed the people, but I did quickly realize that it wasn't the kind of work for me because I didn't exactly agree with the philosophy of Indian Affairs at the time. But when you're young and naive, you have to go in and experience it to understand that. So I didn't stay there that long. But I did meet some wonderful people up north, and I met some people who had known my father as a trapper and a storekeeper and a fur buyer and some very long roots there.

Elaine and I had one of these long, long courtships throughout, that probably went from, we met in '71 and we were married in '78, and then we returned. We actually lived in the Canmore area when the Canmore mine was still open. And I knew a lot of the old miners and that kind of reminded me of Athabasca in those days. But then we came up here in 1980 and we built this log house that we're in, and we're still here.

Up here, we've done different things. Elaine worked at the university as the lab manager, and I spent 12 years on council and kept bees for probably 20 years, and then spent 19 years as the Director of Blue Heron and then retired.

**Heather** I think it's interesting how early on, when you were talking, you moved in Edmonton or was it your grandfather moved everybody, because someone had drowned. And now you could throw a rock into the river.

**Arno** Yeah, and we all played on the river. Our three kids are all great canoeists and adventurous people.

**Heather** Yeah, I think, back then, there wouldn't have been swimming lessons.

**Arno** No, no swimming lessons, things like that. My mother talks about, or talked about, a big treat in Edmonton as a child was getting a dill pickle.

**Heather** Oh. That was probably back in the big barrels.

**Arno** In the big barrels, yep. They were a penny, and if you had a penny, you could get a pickle. But you know, I guess down in Riverdale where she was, the kids would grab a log and kind of float across the river kicking to get to the other side and over into the Whyte Avenue area. So, I guess that kind of explains maybe how that child drowned at the time.

But no swimming lessons. As a kid, there were swimming lessons that began to form at some of the lakes here in the summer. But I didn't know how to swim until I went to university and took a course, and then learned how to swim.

So I think that maybe I did mention earlier about my mother walking to raise funds for the pool. I suspect that might have been some of the motivation. You know, a lifetime of experience gives us motivations that we sometimes don't even know about.

**Heather** Where is Elaine from originally?

**Arno** Elaine was born in Edmonton. She grew up in Parkallen. Oddly enough, our son found a house in Parkallen, probably 15 blocks from where she grew up, and my son's daughter goes to the daycare right by, well it was a grocery store when Elaine was younger there. Small world. That was only a half a block from her house.

**Heather** Wow. And so how did she take to living in the country?

**Arno** Very well. She loves to garden. And, you know, the whole 20 years of beekeeping, which was 20 years of very hard work, we got up to 550 hives.

**Heather** Wow. So is a hive like one box?

**Arno** It's a box, but it's a box that can be five or six high, stacked up.

**Heather** So hive, hive, hive?

**Arno** No. Super. The box is called a super. And from two to five or six supers makes a hive. So we had a lot of equipment and, you know, everything was done by hand. And our biggest crop, I think we got somewhere around 130,000 pounds. And, you know you're farming because that year the price dropped to 12¢ a pound. Today's price is \$3 a pound. And it wasn't that long ago. You know, do the math.

**Heather** Yeah, isn't that the truth?

**Arno** Well, you know, you're farming, you buy retail, sell wholesale, and pay the freight both ways.

**Heather** Yeah, exactly.

**Arno** And that hasn't changed since the days of the store.

**Heather** So what happened actually, with the store?

**Arno** In 1977, I think '76 or '77, my mother just kind of had enough of it.

**Heather** And how old would she have been?

**Arno** Oh boy, from '23.

**Heather** Oh, so 50 something.

**Arno** Yeah. And she well, she was actually offered a job at the post office. And so she, as a veteran, she had some proprietary chances of picking that job.

**Heather** Oh, as a federal right?

**Arno** Right. So she worked there until she retired, and she really liked it. And she said, "You know, I don't have to worry. It's nice to have a paycheck." And not have to constantly worry about, you know, selling something and stocking things, you know, jumping around again.

But I'm just thinking of the inflation that hit in the '70s where I'm kind of stuck at the '60s price of many things, like a pair of blue jeans was \$5.25. GWG blue jeans, \$5.25. And they were better quality because they didn't wear out. You know, you would bring your stock in and you would sell it at the, say, \$5.25 price. And when you go to replace your stock, you were paying suddenly \$12. So your selling price then would have to increase to about \$16. With freight and everything added on. And then when you sold those, the purchasing price was now \$20 so you were constantly putting money into it just to keep your stock. So that's why, in today's market, you don't actually see the price on goods.

You have it, you know, keyed into your computer and it changes as the market changes. But that rapid inflation that went through in the '70s was unbelievable for small

businesses and really challenged them. And you know, if you had been running a business for many years, you kind of get set in your ways. So you don't feel right adjusting the price.

You know, you made that much, and this is what it cost you. But then you have to start dealing with the replacement. For the store, what my mother did was, when she decided she was closing, all of her known customers, whenever they came in to buy anything, she discounted it really deeply for them. And then she got rid of most of her merchandise with these discounts, because then word spread in between a lot of customers. Then the rest of the store went out in an auction sale.

So I kind of kicked myself because there were some things, like button-up boots, you know, from way, way back, they were there when we got the store from Hingley. And there was just some really interesting stuff. One of the interesting things I really don't know what happened to it was two cases of DDT. I remember them. They were these little cans. But I know somebody bought them. They were just there and they weren't for sale, but they were just there. Probably there was no way of really disposing of them at that time safely. So there's a few things.

We also had a very large stuffed animal display because there was a fellow by the name of Appleby that lived down at Baptiste Lake. He was a taxidermist. You know, he did an awful lot of taxidermy. There'd be strange animals coming in, and some of them would get stuffed and put on display for others to see. From a local raccoon that was trapped to, you know, eagles that were destroying livestock that had been taken. That's where the owl comes from that I have, and that owl is older than I am. He is from 1940 something.

**Heather** He was just a menace, and somebody caught him.

**Arno** I can't think of his name, I want to say Jack Appleby stuffed him, and he was in the store, and it kind of reminded me of some little events in my life, so I kind of held on to him. I had some papers from Fish and Wildlife, to have him, that go back.

**Heather** How did you feel when the store was closing?

**Arno** Well, you know, neither my brother or I was interested in running a store.

**Heather** But it was a big part of your life.

**Arno** Yeah. My brother was lucky. He kind of avoided that, somehow. He was older, but he did leave home fairly early. He kind of did avoid the store.

Reminiscing here, but my brother's first job, I think he was 16 and was working for the town. It was a high paying job at 45¢ an hour, and he got a raise to 60¢.

**Heather** Whoa. That's wow.

**Arno** Yeah. He was in the dough.

**Heather** That's a big raise, too.

**Arno** Yeah, it was a huge raise.

**Heather** He must have been doing a good job.

**Heather** Well, I know we realize that that was actually money back then. Somebody like my grandson would go, "Oh, jeez." But that was what it was like.

**Arno** The Saturday matinee at the theater was 10¢, and you had to really scrounge to find that.

**Heather** Yeah. Everything cost less. But there wasn't a lot of money to go around.

**Arno** No, there wasn't. And that's why I kind of mentioned the cream cheques. The \$8 to \$12 cream cheques. And I remember my mother taking \$5 out of the till and going across the street to Super A grocery and buying the week's groceries. That was just what you did. You didn't have to drop \$100 every time you walked into the grocery store.

**Heather** No, exactly. Well, a lot of people had their own meat too, and that's a big part of.

**Arno** And big gardens, too. On this property, we always kept a garden here from the '60s.

**Heather** Oh, it's a fair-sized garden. I can see it from this window.

**Arno** Yeah. The big one was down below.

**Heather** Okay. Oh, this is the reduced size?

**Arno** This is the new garden. This piece of property here is an old historic property. Like, this area was fairly heavily settled in probably the 1800s. There was at least five, six houses down along here. Probably more. It was probably 10 or 12.

**Heather** Like where that gate is if you kept going?

**Arno** No, all along here.

**Heather** There was quite a little community, right here.

**Arno** Right, quite a little settlement. Largely it was just land that people were living on and built a little house. I don't know if they were cutting firewood for the steamboats or just living here, I don't know.

We have a metal detector and we go around and we find some very interesting things from axes to different shipbuilding tools, to coins that go back a long ways, to, you know, old watches and things like that.

**Heather** So this area is still part of the town?

**Arno** No.

**Heather** You're in the county?

**Arno** We're in the county here.

**Heather** Okay, so close.

**Arno** Yeah, so close. You can walk the town, but not in the town. I guess we have a little bit of pioneer spirit, too, because we're fully solar powered, and we've been solar powered since 1980.

**Heather** Oh, wow. You jumped on it early.

**Arno** So you know, that's 42 years of living with solar. Right now, when I see everybody's rate going up to 17¢, I sort of go, oh yeah. It's just when we first came down here, when we built, the cost of running electricity was horrendous, so we began looking at alternatives. And I knew a little bit about solar, and I had actually spent a year or so working for a telephone company, so I had a good understanding of DC electricity. Combining those things and a little bit of growing up on a farm and we cobbled it all together.

**Heather** I can see your panels over there. It's probably changed over the years. You get smaller panels that can produce more.

**Arno** The panels actually have gotten bigger. Interestingly enough, when we first started, a watt of electricity to produce via solar would cost \$10. Now you can have a complete installation at under \$2 a watt. That was just the solar panels at \$10, and that was a really good price. But they were kind of a spin off from the space race, and that \$10 was a big reduction from where they had been previously, to around \$80 or \$90 a watt. So it's been really quite a change there.

**Heather** So you're not even connected to the electric grid?

**Arno** No.

**Heather** Its not like you're backfeeding or anything?

**Arno** No. We have a large battery bank bigger than what a Tesla car would have, you know, in the basement. But over the years, we've changed them out and things like that.

**Heather** So if something happened, how much power, how long would you last without?

**Arno** Well, with my current battery, I could probably get two weeks without any sunlight. But we're not big energy users either. We have a history of not having very much energy, and you can only use what you generate.

**Heather** Well, you know, it's different. I grew up to turn the light off if you leave the room. And half the time it gets dark outside and I'll just sit there with no light on, and I'm just as happy, you know, just having a little, little light or something. You don't need every light on.

**Arno** Well, Elaine and I are different, though. She likes lots of light. So, I mean, at first we had, the first year, we had kerosene lamps and Aladdin lamps. I think we still have a black spot on the roof back over there on the ceiling from when Elaine left the lamp on and went outside, and it had carboned up and started to flare. And she came in the house and there was a two-foot flame coming out the top of the Aladdin lamp and a big pile of soot on the ceiling. That really spurred me on to get going on the solar project, while we still had a house left.

**Heather** Yeah, exactly. Interesting.

**Arno** But you know, there's a lot of old-timers around the community, and it's good to still see them. And their families are still here. A lot of deep roots in this community.

**Heather** I guess one of the things I always ask is if you had any words of wisdom for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Is there anything you can think of you'd like to share?

**Arno** I think my mother's words. If you can help, help. If not, get out of the way.

**Heather** Those are good words.

[End of Interview]

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