

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

Transcription of Bessie Speers recording 2015.mp3

Narrator: Bessie Speers
Interviewer: Rosemary Neaves
June 26, 2015

[Start of Interview]

Rosemary It is June 26, 2015, and I'm sitting in Bessie Speers' lovely apartment at Pleasant Valley Lodge. My name is Rosemary Neaves. Bessie is going to be talking about her stories. How many years back, Bessie?

Bessie Well, 97 years.

Rosemary So there's lots of stories to be told. Would you like to go back to where you were born?

Bessie I was born in Ontario on a farm near St. Thomas, Ontario. We lived there for quite a few years until my dad decided he was going to go out west for harvesting to make some money. He liked it out west. He was happy with the climate and the big farms in the west. It was a lot different from Ontario. So, he decided to move to Alberta. We moved to Alberta when I was around four or five years old and we settled in a small town to start with. I think it was called Edgerton. We then moved to Camrose, Alberta. My mother had been teaching school in Ontario on a permit. She was only 17. When she came to Camrose, she went to Normal School and she got her teaching certificate. While she was going to Normal, I was going to kindergarten. I remember very well. After she got her teaching diploma, she was hired at a school in Meanook, Alberta. I'm not sure whether it was two or three years that she taught in Meanook.

Bessie When we were in Meanook, my dad built some grain bins close to the house. He and another guy started buying grain from farmers. Then they built an elevator in Meanook. My dad ran the elevator for a few years while my brother helped. They both worked on building the elevator. The elevator is not there now. It burned down a few years later. It was called the Parrish and Heimbecker elevator. From there we moved to Perryvale because my mother got a teaching job in Perryvale. I think she taught there for two or three years. She taught in different areas. I think she taught in Perryvale first because I went to the Lewiston School District. I forget what grade I was in, but after that she got a teaching job in Willow Ridge.

Bessie It was in Willow Ridge that I took up to my grade 11 in education. When I went to school my mother was always my teacher. It wasn't always easy to be a teacher's child because sometimes the children didn't care for you. They weren't really teasers, but they sometimes weren't nice. But anyhow, she taught in Willow Ridge, George Lake and White Clover. I don't know whether those schools still exist or not, but I know that Willow Ridge is still being used for different functions like bingos and that. But as far as the other schools, I don't know about them. At one point all the children were moved to a central school in Perryville.

Bessie I took my grade 11 at Willow Ridge. At that time we had to go from Willow Ridge to a center to write departmental exams because Willow Ridge was just a country school. We could go either to Colinton or Athabasca to write the departmental exams.

Bessie I met my husband at Willow Ridge. He went there for a few years and then quit. We would go to dances and out to parties. We went out for about five years and then we got married. I was 19 when we got married. We moved to the homestead after we got married.

Rosemary When you say homestead, do you mean you built a log house?

Bessie We were living in a little log house. We chopped and carried wood. Our water came from a well and we had to carry it too. We had a few cattle, some sheep and some pigs. Five of my children were born on the homestead. We had neighbors who had a telephone line put up between the different neighbors around, and then it was finally connected to Perryvale.

Rosemary Was that a party line?

Bessie Yes, a party line. And then it was connected to Perryville later on. When we were living at the homestead, my husband had taken out some lumber off of my dad's homestead. There were jack pines that he sawed into lumber because we were planning on building a house on another quarter of land that we had bought. In the meantime, before we got the house built, our log house caught fire.

Rosemary Oh, my.

Bessie The stove pipe ran through the attic. The attic was lined with shavings and I think the sparks flew out of the stove pipe. The stove pipe had got worn and the sparks caught in the shavings that insulated the house. And so the house burned down in short order. This happened in the daytime or we wouldn't have been so lucky. We had already built an addition on the log house. Three of the children were in Perryvale school when the fire happened. I managed to get the two younger ones, who were still at home, out of the log house and put them on a rocking chair outside. Everybody got out because it was in the middle of the day. I phoned my sister Viola and all I could say was "Fire!" There was no time to say anything else. Her husband came with a hired man and a wagon. I think the fire happened on April the 9th. There was still snow on the ground. Viola's husband came with sleighs, or maybe it was a wagon. I forget what they had. But anyhow, he picked up the children from school and took them down to their grandparents, Samuel and Elizabeth Speers. My mother took one of the children to school with her. She was teaching at George Lake at the time.

Bessie We had to live in a granary for some time after that. We had a hot plate and a single bed. My husband had built it when he was taking out logs for lumber. So that's what we lived in. Well, it was kind of like a granary, but it was actually called a bunkhouse. So we lived in the granary and cooked on the hot plate. We had no means of travel except by horses and wagon.

Bessie Each time I went to the hospital to have my babies, the neighbors took me. Their names were Mr. and Mrs. Nichol. They were our closest neighbors.

Bessie I had trouble with one of my pregnancies. I was out helping my husband fence when the labour pains started. There were no cars around and there was nobody living close by. The closest neighbours were maybe two or three miles away. My sister and brother-in-law weren't home. So my husband went up to the neighbours. Their last name was Hanna. Mr. and Mrs. Hanna came down and they sent one of their family up to another neighbor called Mr. Locher.

Bessie Mrs. Locher came down. She happened to be a nurse in the old country. She was an elderly lady. She came down and helped me. The baby was coming feet first. I was in a lot of pain for quite a long time until Mrs. Locher came. She pushed him back and managed to turn him around. So then he came out all right. He came headfirst and he never went to the hospital. That was the third child. He never went to a hospital or doctor until after he left home. That was really pretty good.

Bessie I guess I got things out of order because I was talking about the three children going to school and I just talked about the third child being born. But anyhow, we lived in the granary until we got the house built on the other quarter.

Rosemary How long did it take to build the house? Were you in the granary over a winter?

Bessie Oh no..... we were in the granary for just two or three months. He already had the lumber and he was building the house up there when we had the fire. It was April when the log house burned down. It was spring and the basement for the new house had already been dug, but it was all filled with water. He pulled out some big logs and he started to build the house on the side on these logs. And then after he got the house built, he used one horse and a stump puller to pull the house onto the foundation.

Bessie So, we had the house built. At that time there was no electricity or anything.

Bessie We waited until all the water in the basement dried up or got pumped out or something. So then they moved the house onto the cement basement with one horse and a stump puller. It went on perfectly smooth. But I missed out on some of this because I had one baby in the hospital in the Royal Alexandra. She was a celiac baby so I had been going to Edmonton to be with her. While she was in the hospital in Edmonton, she got the measles. And later on, I got the measles. She had been in the hospital different times because she had celiac disease and wasn't thriving. She died at the age of three years. Previously I said I had five children, but actually I guess I had six at the time of the fire. Later on I had two more.

Rosemary So you had seven children?

Bessie Yeah. Altogether, yeah.

Rosemary And did you want to go through their names?

Bessie There was Donald, Neil, Larry, Marcella, Gladys, Sharon and Bruce, but Sharon and Bruce were born in later years. Shirley was born after Gladys. So there was Gladys and then Shirley. Shirley passed away at the age of three years. There's about six years between Gladys and Sharon, and Bruce was two to three years later. I forget what we were talking about.

Rosemary You were talking about your little girl having the celiac disease and they didn't know how to treat it then.

Bessie No, they didn't know how to treat celiac. Anyhow, she passed away at the age of three years in Edmonton.

Bessie Later there was two more born - Sharon and Bruce. Shirley was born after Gladys. There's about six years in between Sharon and then later Bruce.

Rosemary You had quite a handful.

Bessie Yes, it was a handful.

Rosemary And did you do things like make your own butter and churn your own milk?

Bessie We always had a cow for milking. We had a few cows. We didn't have too many. We had horses, too. And we had pigs and we had chickens. The cream truck came around and picked up cream about once a week. We shipped eggs, too. When we moved to the new house up on the other farm, my husband tried to move the barn from the homestead to the new place but it collapsed when he took it across a field. He took it apart and built a chicken coop up there. He built a double decker chicken coop. Then he bought a roost of chickens.

Rosemary So how many chickens did you end up with?

Bessie So I ended up with about 700 chickens. Well, 700 little chicks, but of course as they got bigger we killed off the roosters and just kept the hens.

Bessie When we moved to the new house the school buses were coming up to the house from Perryvale. The older children were going to school at Perryvale. Later on when the children got older, there were two buses coming to our door. The older children were going to Athabasca, and the younger ones were going to Perryvale. I was busy all the time, of course, with one thing and another.

Bessie My husband was sick. The doctor had made an appointment for his operation with a heart specialist. He was operated on by Dr. Callaghan years ago but, at that time, it was just a plastic valve that they put in. At that time they only gave him about two years to live but they didn't tell him that. But he lived five years with the plastic valve. Anyway, it wore out and later on he passed away. So he died at the age of 52.

Rosemary Oh, my goodness. I didn't realize he was that young.

Bessie Yeah, he died at the age of 52 in 1968.

Bessie By this time, the older boys were out of school. One had gone up to Fort St. John to work. Don, the oldest one, left home and went to work at his grandparents. Don and his dad weren't getting along. Then Neil, the next one, quit school when he was 17. He went to work in Fort St. John. And then, Larry had been helping a neighbor at different times sawing lumber. He went and stayed with them over at Perryvale, and he went to school from their place.

Bessie Then Marcella met a guy from Grassland at a dance, and after a year or two, they got married and she moved to Grassland. She married Lloyd Jenkins from Grassland.

Bessie And of course, Gladys was gone. I think she went to Drayton Valley to help look after a group of small children. So, she was away from home, too.

Bessie And, by this time, Sharon, was in Athabasca and she married Richard Wilson. They ended up moving to Sherwood Park outside of Edmonton. Then it was just Bruce and I at home alone for a while.

Rosemary Was Bruce doing the farming?

Bessie Well, there wasn't really anybody doing much farming. I used to go out and work the land myself with a tractor. We didn't have very good equipment. But anyhow, afterwards, I got some money. I don't think I mentioned that my husband had joined the army and was in the army for a few months. So we were alone when he left for training.

Rosemary Did he have active duty?

Bessie No, he was just in training camp for a few months. And then by the time he got to the boat, the war was over.

Rosemary Was there a pension or something?

Bessie Yes, I was getting a pension from the government and so that helped. I bought a tractor and I did a year or two of farming there by myself. I loved to get out in the field and see the soil turn over. One year - maybe it was two - I sowed the crop myself. What I put in was all sown into grass, alfalfa and a mixture of seed.

Bessie So I lived on the farm by myself and my youngest son for about 16 years. There were times when he was all alone. I went curling some nights and I also went to art classes during the daytime. I had a car at this time. I got the car when the buses were turning in our yard. One of the guys that drove the bus asked me if I wanted a car. I said, "Sure". So I sold a cow to buy the car. I think I paid \$250.00. The car worked good. And I drove for a while and I got my driver's license. About this time, Bruce was getting into a lot of trouble. He sure caused me a lot of trouble when he was a kid because he was all by himself. He got into trouble, him and the others. But anyhow, it turned out all right. He just had to pay a fine. After this happened, Bruce left to work on oil rigs and I was alone on the farm. He had some debts to pay.

Bessie So then I was all by myself. I was there for about 16 years and I did some farming myself. But then it wasn't long before a neighbour, who lived by Perryvale and worked as a matron at Pleasant Valley Lodge, called and asked, "Bessie, would you like to go to work?" I said, "Sure". She told me to come up and fill out an application. I had my car going at this time. So I went and filled out an application. Then I went to work at Pleasant Valley Lodge. I drove to Pleasant Valley Lodge from the homestead for around seven years.

Rosemary What kind of work did you do?

Bessie I worked in the kitchen. I ran the dishwasher. I worked in the dining room. The dining room was different then from what it is today. I used to do double shift. They asked me if I wanted to work at night so sometimes I'd worked until 12:00 and sometimes later. I would end up getting home in the morning. I guess this was when Bruce was getting into trouble. But anyhow he went to work in the oil fields and I was there by myself for quite a while. But I finally decided it was time to move. So in 1984, I sold the farm to Don, the oldest boy. He had been working for the Department of Highways and he was living in Slave Lake. He used to come down quite often. They would come down and get vegetables because they were just living in town. They'd get vegetables and rhubarb and other stuff out of the garden. So then I sold him the farm. He and his wife and children moved to the farm in 1984. His wife was a nurse and she started work at the hospital. So they were doing okay. They had three children about that time. I moved to Athabasca when I sold the farm. I bought myself a home in Athabasca and I still have that home today. I believe I lived in that house for about 30 years.

Bessie A year ago, I moved to the lodge. I guess I should have stayed home longer, but my kids figured I should move to the lodge. And so I still have my home, but I rent it out. Now, the renters are gone so I think I'm going to put it up for sale. I enjoyed my time in Athabasca, in my house. I really did. I had a beautiful house and flowers and I really enjoyed my time there. I joined the Royal Purple Ladies and I was Honoured Royal Lady for one year. I joined the Legion in Athabasca. I helped with catering for birthday parties and weddings. There was always one thing or another. We used to have a chicken supper about once a month. I enjoyed my time working at the Legion.

Bessie I still have my house and I moved to the Lodge about a year ago in June. I have enjoyed my life here, too.

Rosemary I just realized I didn't ask you what your maiden name was.

Bessie Silverthorn. Bessie Rose Silverthorn.

Rosemary Bessie and I were just looking at some photographs that she has here. There is one of your family, your mother and father and your siblings. What were the names of your sisters and brothers?

Bessie I was born in 1918 on a farm out from St. Thomas or Straffordville. My birth certificate says I was born in the county of Elgin in Ontario.

Rosemary And your family name was Silverthorn?

Bessie Yes. My mother's name was Bartlett. There were 11 brothers and sisters in the family. My mother's name was Luella Margaret. And my dad's name was Manley Silverthorn.

Rosemary You had three sisters?

Bessie I have two sisters and one brother. I am the youngest in the family. My brother was the oldest. His name was Lewis Silverthorn. My oldest sister's name was Viola Silverthorn, and then Muriel Silverthorn came next. She had very dark red hair. And I am, of course, the baby of the family.

Rosemary There's a very nice picture of you, your mother, your brother and sisters back in Ontario before you actually came here. We talked about you coming to Alberta, and the fact that you eventually ended up in Camrose and then eventually to Perryvale, right?

Bessie My dad came out for harvesting. He came out to Alberta and he liked the west country so much that he decided to move. And so they moved to a small town first and then they moved to Camrose. That's where my mother went to normal school and got her teaching certificate. She had taught in Ontario on a permit at the age of 17 years old.

Rosemary That was unusual in those days, right?

Bessie Well, there was a shortage of teachers. She got a small school in Vega which is around Barrhead someplace. I went with her and she taught there for part of a year. And from there, I think she got a school at Willow Ridge. She taught at Willow Ridge for a year or two, and then she taught at George Lake and then White Clover. Then she went back and taught at Willow Ridge again, and that's where they settled down. They bought a farm right across from the school.

Bessie My son Larry and his wife live on that farm now. They've been there for quite a while, almost since they got married. Larry met his wife when they were going to university. His wife was raised in Edmonton. After they got married they bought the farm from my brother and they settled on the farm and have been there ever since. Larry's wife always says that I taught her lots on the farm. I didn't live too far away.

Rosemary And how many years did your mother teach? It sounds like she was always teaching!

Bessie She taught for twenty-five years in the County of Athabasca. I always went to school with my mother. I took my grade eleven under my mother. I got my grade eleven, but I didn't go after that. I had been going out with a friend that I went to school with. We were going out to dances for probably four or five years. By then I was 19 and doing lots of dances.

Rosemary Were there a lot of dances?

Bessie Yes, there were lots of dances. Dances were the main form of entertainment. We would go to dances in different places around the small school districts.

Rosemary Were the dances usually in the school houses?

Bessie Yes, dances were often in school houses. Sometimes dances would be in Meanook. Meanook had a hall, and I think Perryvale had a hall. There were lots of small schools around until they amalgamated and moved to a more central school. I met my husband at Willow Ridge when I was just nicely out of school. We went out together for about five years and went to parties and dances and one thing or another. We never did go to the bar. And I never did smoke. But anyhow, we got married. I was 19 by then, and we settled in the log cabin on the homestead.

Rosemary Did you build the log cabin?

Bessie Well, he had moved it from his dad's farm and he rebuilt it up there. Later on, he added a lumber part to the house. That's where five of the children were born. Don was the oldest, then Neil. Neil was born at home and it was a very difficult birth. Don was born in Edmonton. Neil was born at home. Larry was born in the hospital and then came Marcella, and then Gladys.

Bessie And then there was our little girl, Shirley. I guess I was run down and Shirley was very sickly. She spent a lot of time in the Royal Alexandra Hospital. But anyhow, she had what they called celiac disease, and at that time they had never seen that sort of disease much before. She was in and out of the hospital many times, and she finally succumbed to the disease. I remember the doctor who looked after her (his name was Calder) said if I let him do a post mortem on her, then he wouldn't send us a bill. At that time you had to pay doctors. Maybe you don't have to pay them now, but at that time, you had to pay doctor bills and your hospital bills. So anyhow, the doctor said doing the post mortem might help them find out something that will perhaps help somebody else.

Rosemary Yes, contributing to the research.

Bessie I had two more children in later years. I think there were about six years before the last two were born. Their names are Sharon and Bruce. My husband's name was Roy Speers. We worked hard on the farm. One day he was away from home and I had little chickens in a brooder in the house. He wasn't around and it was in the daytime. The log cabin part of the house was lined with shavings. The stovepipe just went through the attic and through the shavings. And I guess the pipes must have worn down and there were probably little pinholes in them. The sparks flew out into the shavings. The house caught fire and burned to the ground in no time because the attic was lined with shavings. That was the 9th of April that the house burned. We lived in the granary until he could get the house built.

Bessie We moved into the new house in the first part of November and all we had was an old table that we got from the neighbors and I can't remember where we got the cookstove. We had an oil barrel, sort of drum, that we used as a heater to keep the house warm. Winter was coming on - it was already November. I should say that

they built a brick chimney. And I figured, well, everything's going to be all right now. We got a brick chimney. And that took some time, too. We didn't have too much but at least we were warm and dry.

Bessie By this time, the older boys were going to school, and, as I said, my mother took Larry with her when the house burnt. So I guess the two little girls were with us. By that time the other little girl, Shirley, had passed away.

Rosemary That was a year that you'll never forget.

Bessie Yes, I guess it was hard. Sometimes there are lots of things that you think you can't get through, but then you finally do. But anyhow, we had the farm up by the other place and there was quite a bit of land broken.

Bessie While my husband was away training, I had bought this quarter from my brother-in-law Bill Speers. I was always wishing that I'd put it in my own name instead of putting it in his so, you know, I would have one of them in my own name. But anyhow, I didn't - I wasn't smart enough. Anyhow, it turned out all right. We were there for quite a while before my husband got real sick. He put in a crop. Of course, we bought a small tractor; it was just a Ford.

Rosemary So, no more horses?

Bessie No, it was just a small Ford tractor. But, of course, we had some machinery as well. Time went on.

Rosemary Bessie, I wanted to ask you about painting. You got into painting, didn't you?

Bessie Yes.

Rosemary When did you get interested in painting? Had you painted since you were a child?

Bessie There was a band from Calgary. I can't remember his name, but he's been on TV and I think there are still tapes that come on TV. I don't know how come it was, but he was holding painting sessions in Meanook. By that time my husband had passed away. I was driving. I had bought an old car for \$250. I sold a cow and bought my car. So the painting class was in Meanook and my sister Viola and I had heard about it. So we both took classes.

Bessie I think he used to come just once a month. We took quite a few painting classes. I did quite a lot of painting after my husband had passed away. I did different things like painting, paper tole and things like that to keep myself busy. I also went curling. I'd be out going to painting class one day and maybe, another day or so, I'd be curling. By this time all the children were away.

Bessie I think I forgot to mention that Donald had gone to Slave Lake when he was about 17 to work in a lumber camp to start with. He took up mechanics and he joined

the Department of Highways and he worked for several years at Slave Lake. He married a girl from Smith. Her name was Lillian Savard.

Bessie Neil was only 17 when he and a couple other guys quit school and went north to Fort St John to work in a lumber camp.

Bessie I think Larry's grandmother helped him because somebody had talked him into continuing on with his education. Somebody had talked him into going to university. I think his grandmother helped him some because we couldn't afford it. So he went to university and he got to play football as well as wrestling. Larry went to Argentina and he wrestled in the world championships in Argentina. And I guess he did pretty good. He didn't come out first, but he did pretty good.

Bessie So Donald went on to become a mechanic. Neil went up north to work in the lumber camp and then later worked on the rigs. Larry became a teacher, and he taught for years in Rochester, Alberta, and then he was principal in Athabasca for a number of years until he retired. He met his wife going to university. I think she taught some in Edmonton and she taught in Athabasca as well.

Bessie Marcella, the girl, went through grade 12. She married a man from Grassland that she had met at a dance. She moved to Grassland after they got married.

Bessie And the next one, Gladys, met Ralph Spence out at dances. Her and Ralph got married. They bought a farm in the Perryvale area and they've been there ever since. Gladys and Ralph had four boys and they are pretty well all grown up now.

Bessie Then there was Sharon and Bruce. They came later in life. Sharon worked in a cafe in Athabasca and she met Richard Wilson. They got married and they moved to Sherwood Park and they're still in Sherwood Park. And, Bruce, well he ran into a little bit of trouble because I was never home. I was either going to art classes and painting or I was going curling. He was left alone so much and got himself in a bit of trouble. But anyhow, he straightened out and he got married. They have a beautiful home. He got married when he was quite young. They didn't have any children for about ten years and then they adopted one. Then after that, they had two of their own. Bruce works on the rigs.

Bessie Donald and Lillian have three boys. They live on our farm in the Willow Ridge area. Donald has one son, Darren, who lives at home. One of their sons, Brent, bought the farm across the road from their farm. He has a lady friend. And the middle one got married and he lives east of Colinton. So they're all within a short distance of one another. I have quite a few grandchildren and now I have quite a lot of great grandchildren.

Rosemary You have a picture here of you and your family on your 97th birthday. That's quite a recent photograph.

Bessie Yes, my birthday. I don't know whether I missed telling you everything much in between or not, but I did my best at age 97.

Rosemary You have been amazing!

Rosemary And you also were involved with Royal Purple, weren't you?

Bessie Yes, I was involved with the Royal Purple for quite a few years. I was Honoured Royal Lady for one year, which is the head person. There was quite a group at that time. But then people started dropping out and there weren't too many left. The ones who remained ended up going over to Lac La Biche and joined the Royal Purple over there. When they went to Lac La Biche, I didn't bother going with them. I just quit.

Bessie I continued to paint when I was in Athabasca. I curled for 30 years. I started curling when I was on the farm after I was widowed. I don't know whether I said this before but I had been on the farm for quite a while by myself until I sold it to the oldest boy.

Rosemary I think you told me that you had 85 paintings.

Bessie At least, yes, at least.

Bessie So are they gracing the walls of different people's homes?

Bessie Yes. I donated some of them to the Farm Women's Conference.

Rosemary Mostly landscapes, right?

Bessie Yes, mostly landscapes. I could show you some.

Bessie But anyhow, I kept busy through the years when I was by myself. My husband passed away at the age of 52. I spent a lot of time on the farm before I moved to town.

Rosemary Let's not forget that you were Farm Woman of the Year.

Bessie It was 2012. I was honoured by being Farm Woman of the Year. That is quite an honour. They have a womens' conference once a year.

Rosemary Congratulations on that!

Bessie Thank you.

Rosemary You royally deserve it.

Bessie I think that's about it.

[End of Interview}

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