

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

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Transcription of Betty Salé recording 2016.mp3

Narrator: Betty Salé
Interviewer: Agnes Wurfel
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[Start of Interview]

Agnes My name is Agnes Wurfel. I'm interviewing Betty Sale. We are at the Athabasca Pleasant Valley Lodge and this is April 27th and it's two o'clock in the afternoon.

Betty My name is Elizabeth Dorothy Salé and my maiden name was Elizabeth Dorothy Knittle. My father's full name was Louis Phillip Knittle. My mother's full name was Anna Marie Andreas and my date of birth is January 8th, 1934.

Agnes/Betty And where were you born? In Saskatchewan.

Agnes/Betty What town? Abbey

Agnes And could you tell us a bit about Abbey, the size of Abbey and the distance from Abbey to maybe the closest place?

Betty I really don't remember because I was only three and a half when we left. I know it was a small town and close to Swift Current.

Agnes/Betty Is Abbey still there? Oh yes. It would be mostly retired farmers there now.

Agnes You were from a big family. What was your placement?

Betty I was the oldest of 11.

Agnes/Betty What language did you speak? We spoke German until we moved to Clyde when we had to learn English to go to school.

Agnes Could you tell us a bit about life in the Dust Bowl, not from what you remember, because you were too young, but from what you heard your parents say?

Betty The Dust Bowl. One of the only things that grew was the Russian thistle and it would blow along the fences. Then the dust would blow in, then more thistle would blow in, then more dust. There were no fences. The cattle could get out wherever they wanted to and that was probably why it was called the Dust Bowl.

Agnes Yes, that was the biggest problem. What was the biggest problem for women?

Betty One of the problems for women was that dust would come into the houses and it was all over. I remember one time Mom went to get the cows. When she came back and checked on the baby, he was covered with dust. Everything was covered except his nostrils because he could blow the dust away. He was fast asleep. He didn't even know.

Agnes/Betty But your mother would have worried. Oh, of course.

Agnes Can you tell me about that favorite aunt of yours?

Betty She was a real sweetheart. If Mom got mad at me, I would just walk half a mile to her house. I would tell her what Mom did to me. We made up a plan: If I had a note in my hand, I could stay. If I didn't have a note, she had to bring me right back so Mom would know where I was.

Agnes That was quite something for a three-year-old to walk half a mile to their aunt's place. That is something that young people can't even imagine doing now.

Betty But, you know what? There were no trees, no nothing. It was an open field so I could see where I was going.

Agnes And your mother could call you from a long distance! [laughter] Did you have a dog?

Betty I did have a dog.

Agnes And the dog followed you?

Betty Not always, but one time during the Dust Bowl I was picking flowers on our way home from somewhere and the dog was with us. Mom let me stay picking flowers but she wanted to get home ahead of the storm to milk. When she finished milking, she said to Dad, "Pete, where's Betty?" They called and called but no answer. Dad said, "The dog's gone too. Call the dog." So they called the dog. They heard the dog bark so they knew exactly where I was . . . picking flowers!

Agnes When did your father make the big decision to move to Clyde? What made him make that decision?

Betty I think it was a promotion made by the Alberta government. He was given free transportation to come to Clyde. He hoped by coming to Alberta that they could make a better living. So they came. My mom had a sister in Westlock. My grandpa and dad came and found a place to rent. Then he came back home. By the time we were ready to go, the government said no more free transportation—so now what do we do? Well, we decided to come in a covered wagon with a family and two other riders to carry all our animals and our machinery.

Agnes/Betty Do you remember your Mom talking about the food and the problems that she had preparing food for that trip? How long was that trip? A whole month.

Agnes Yeah. Did she have to do a lot of canning?

Betty I think we had veggies and chickens so we had eggs. We didn't have a cow because one time when we needed to have milk, a farmer wouldn't give us any. So at five o'clock in the morning my Dad got up and milked the cow. Not just the quart that we had asked for, but the whole cow. Mom made cottage cheese and I don't know what else but we used every drop of it.

Agnes How many children were they traveling with?

Betty Three. Baby was just 3 months old, my brother was a year and a half, and I was three and a half.

Agnes What time of the year was this?

Betty It was in July. It was quite a problem to keep the food fresh. Mom canned chicken before we left and between the heat and the shaking from the wagon, it spoiled. She didn't realize it had spoiled so we ate it and got some sick. It was lucky for the cracks in the ground so they could have bathrooms all over the place.

Agnes So there must have been berries to pick on the way.

Betty I don't remember picking berries, but I would assume there were berries. Dad was a good berry picker and he would have been picking berries.

Agnes I would think there were probably some small animals that they could eat for meat—maybe birds?

Betty I don't think we butchered our chickens. I think we used the eggs. Yeah, I don't remember eating the chickens.

Agnes How did you feed the animals that you had?

Betty You just went across into the field and you threw them whatever was in the field. If it was hay in the field, if it was grain in the field, you threw it to your animals. Some people were very generous and came along with more. Others would say, "You know what? The police station is just down the road and we are going to report you to the police if you don't get out of here!" The same thing happened with water. There was no water anywhere on the road. One time the farmer said, "We're on our way out of here. We don't have time to water your horses. No, you can't have any water." So Dad just waited until they left and then he went and started the windmill and watered all the horses. We found out afterwards that they were not allowed to begrudge us water and food on the way.

Agnes OK, so your Dad used common sense and it turned out the laws in the country were also saying the same thing.

Betty Cruelty to animals. You can't do that! And cruelty to people.

Betty There was one Ukrainian family who was really something. The old man threw a whole bunch of extra food out for the horses and then he motioned to my mother to go to the house. Mom thought, "Why would I go to the house? She won't know a word of English." Well, they didn't have to talk! From the moment my mother came through the door the woman grabbed the baby and cooed and cooed to the baby. Then she filled a tub with water to bathe the baby. I think the rest of us had baths too. We left with a big bag of donuts.

Agnes Did your Dad mention how close together were the farms?

Betty I think they were pretty well populated so I am guessing one about every mile or so.

Agnes They were homesteads and they were actually close together in those days. It's not the case anymore.

Betty No, no. But in those days it was.

Agnes Once you got established in Clyde, could you tell us a little bit about the set up there in Clyde?

Betty There was an old house there and we just took our time and remodeled it. The barn was on the other side of the road. There was a road that went across our field from one farm to the next farm to the next road, and Dad just had to go across the road to fix up the old barn good enough so they could put the animals in the barn.

Agnes And how far was your farm from the village of Clyde?

Betty I think it must been about seven miles. But in the winter when you could go across the lake, it was a lot closer, maybe only three or four miles. When you had to go around on the road it would have been about seven miles.

Agnes So you're talking about a lake called Bouchard Lake.

Betty I can't recall but yes, I know there's a sign now that says it is some kind of camp.

Agnes You also mentioned that in your first year of school your mother drove you to school. Can you explain to us why a woman from that time period would be driving a car?

Betty Well, I don't think it was new because Grandma drove a car while Mom lived there. I think she borrowed a car from a neighbor because she felt sorry for us walking. I

don't think we had one. She could use it until the fall but she couldn't drive it in the winter when we had to go by horse and buggy.

Agnes It was quite something for a woman from that time period to be driving,

Betty Even Grandma. I don't know if it was the second time she drove the car but she came to the gate and said, "Whoa!" and the car didn't stop. It went right through the gate. She thought it was a horse and she was used to driving horses.

Agnes You talked about having to walk to school after that first year. And can you talk about the distance and about your little brother when he started school and what happened?

Betty That was Justin and he was in Grade 1. We had four miles to walk in the morning and four miles at night. In the winter we walked across the lake so it was only two miles. The teacher would feel sorry for him. She would lay a whole bunch of coats on the table at the back of the room and put him down for a sleep. She knew he was played out.

Agnes You mentioned you had many different teachers at that school and you had a different teacher almost every year.

Betty Almost every year. I only went to Bouchard school until Grade 6. I went to town school in Grade 7. But yeah, we had a new teacher every year as far as I can remember.

Agnes So when did the bus start taking you to school?

Betty Probably when I went to Grade 7. We had to walk a mile out to take the bus and then after that, the bus came by our door. We got that all arranged before winter.

Agnes So you mentioned that you had quit school in the middle of your Grade 12. That school in Clyde went right up to Grade 12.

Betty Yes, it did and the only reason I didn't finish my Grade 12 was because I got pneumonia. The doctor suggested to Mom that it might be a good idea for me to take the rest of the year off and go back to school the next year. However, I met my husband and there was no going back to school.

Agnes Let's talk about your parents. Were they milking cows and raising poultry on that farm?

Betty Oh, yes everything. They had pigs, probably even turkeys.

Agnes/Betty And did they have electricity on that farm? No, no.

Agnes Did they do a lot of berry picking around Clyde?

Betty Oh, yes! They would make a picnic out of it. You know, we would pick up the neighbors in our wagon. We filled a cream can with water and by nighttime the cream can would be full of berries and the water would all be drank.

Agnes What kind of berries?

Betty Blueberries mostly, saskatoons and chokecherries. We had choke cherries at our own farm. No raspberries. They were small and full of worms.

Agnes Can you tell us about your work at home? I think you were like a second mother, almost.

Betty My sisters still say that I was more of a mother to them than my mother was—she was a tomboy. All her sisters would be in the house and Mom would be playing ball with the boys. She was still the same way with Dad.

Agnes Can you tell us about some of the work that you did.

Betty I scrubbed floors. When I was older I washed clothes when Mom got a washing machine with the handle on it that you pulled back and forth. I didn't wash clothes in the tub with the scrub board—I wasn't big enough I guess.

Agnes You did a lot of babysitting.

Betty Oh, I looked after those kids and I prepared meals. I'll tell you what I did one time. I remember seeing Mom put potatoes in the frying pan and then crack eggs on top of them. I didn't know that the potatoes were pre-cooked. But you can imagine—I took a bite into supper and the potatoes were raw with fried eggs on top. [laughter]

Agnes/Betty Do you remember being complimented on that meal? No!

Agnes/Betty They must have realized that you were a beginning cook. I just didn't know you had to cook the potatoes ahead of time.

Agnes So, they didn't prepare you properly. You brought up the matter of meeting your husband. Can you tell us how you got to meet him and tell us about the plays that you put on?

Betty It was with a group called Catholic Youth Group. Every year we would put on a play and we would put it on in different towns. We brought one to Athabasca one year and that is how I met him. Then we brought another one down to Athabasca and I met him again. I didn't see him for a year. And then he finally got inquisitive about that little girl that he met from Clyde. So he came down to a baseball game and of course, I wasn't there. The roads were so bad that he couldn't come to get me but somehow or another he got word to me that he was coming the next weekend. And he did!

Agnes OK, and you talked about a trip to Edmonton to see a movie once.

Betty That was one of the nights we went to visit his sister. She suggested that we should take in a drive-in movie. She knew I'd see so very few movies—that was back in the 60s. But anyway, we went to the drive-in movie and after the movie was over, we couldn't get out of the movie. We waited, and waited, and waited, and finally we got to go. It was two o'clock in the morning when I got home and my Dad was fit to be tied. I'd never ever done that in my life and I wasn't going to do it again. When I explained it all, Dad understood.

Agnes So then your husband, Louis Sale, who was your boyfriend at that time, was driving a car?

Betty Yes. They had a new car. They got the only car that came into Athabasca during the war. He had it one weekend and Leo had it the other. It was a model T, a nice car.

Agnes/Betty And who is Leo? His brother, older brother.

Agnes Do you think when Louis was hanging around that your parents were suspicious that they maybe would lose you and that it caused a bit of a problem for them?

Betty I don't think so because they really liked Louis. In fact my Mom said to me one day, "Don't you ever do anything to ruin your friendship with that boy. He's such a nice boy."

Agnes/Betty So when were you married? January 8th, 1953.

Agnes/Betty Can you give us a few details about your marriage? What would you like to know?

Agnes Well, where did it take place?

Betty We were married in Athabasca, mostly because Louis's mom was not well enough to come to Clyde for the wedding. So we got married in Athabasca and had dinner there. Then we went to my mum's house for supper and the Clyde hall for a community dance. At midnight they sang Happy Birthday to me because I turned 19. I wanted to get married on my 19th birthday but Mom said, "No. We are having a houseful of company the next day and I don't plan on cooking another meal!" That was Friday, and Friday was a big deal then. She didn't want to cook again so we had food left over from the wedding.

Agnes OK, so then you went on a honeymoon and that was very special for that time, that time period. Can you tell us why it was so special?

Betty It was so special because I think Louis made the first camper ever made. It was built like a little house on the back of our truck. He arranged it so that my cupboard, when it was closed, was my cupboard, and when it was open and laid down, it was my table. We had so little space in there, you know! [laughter]

Agnes How long were you gone?

Betty We went to Key West, Florida and we were gone just a little less than a month because we wanted to get back before Dad's birthday. I think it was February the 6th. I can't remember.

Agnes Where did you live after your wedding?

Betty We lived with Louis's mom for a year while they built our house. We lived there until Anna was born. We left the hospital and went straight to our new home with the baby. Anna was born in December and it was probably January by the time I was able to leave the hospital. They made you stay in the hospital so long in those days. Anyway, we left the hospital and went straight to our home with the baby.

Agnes You mentioned that the Catholic Church burnt down that year.

Betty Yeah, that happened probably a month after we came home from our honeymoon. They were sawing logs at our place and it came on the news. When they came in for lunch I said, "Guess what? We don't have a church!" That put them all in a tizzy so they all got together and arranged to go in the bush and cut logs. They arranged for a sawmill and then they sawed the logs, and then started building the church.

Agnes And you mentioned something about a woman.

Betty Oh, Theresa Major! She was in there like a dirty sock with the guys. She'd built her own house as well, but she came over whenever the guys were there, and she would go out there and help them build.

Agnes That was in 1953. That was the year you got married.

Betty Yeah.

Agnes How long did it take to get that church built?

Betty Oh, it took forever. We went to church in the basement of the Community Center for a long time. The Community Center wasn't even that well finished and we were in the basement. Then from there they offered us the theater. So we went there for a long time. Then we finally got moved to our own church basement and finally, finally, finally we got to go upstairs.

Agnes/Betty Who was the priest then? I don't remember; my memory is not as good as it used to be.

Agnes/Betty OK, so you mentioned your first home. Did you have electricity in that home? No, not until our third baby was born.

Agnes What about a fridge?

Betty We had a fridge but it was a coal oil or gas fridge of some kind. Then we did finally get the power. I think they gave us the poles, but we had to put them up and put the wire on them and hook them up to their line. No, they hooked it up to their line.

Agnes So when did you get your first phone?

Betty It must be about the same time. The first electric thing we got when we had power was our deep freeze and we had ice cream in it. We weren't smart enough to call the power company when the power went off. They didn't know our power was off, so we had whipped cream instead of ice cream.

Agnes At that time how large was your family? How far were your children spaced apart?

Betty Our first two were a year and a half apart, and then Diane and Gene were 15 months apart. There was a three-year break between Diane and Bernadine, and then almost three years between Bernadine and Elise.

Agnes So during those busy years, you mentioned to me once that you had to milk a cow. What surprised me about it was that you were really happy when you finally got rid of that cow. Can you explain to me how in the world one cow was too much for you?

Betty It wasn't the cow that was the problem. It was her milk.

Betty Louis's Mom used to be adamant that only Louis could milk the cow. I said, "You know what? When he gets home he's been gone from five o'clock in the morning until maybe nine o'clock at night. I don't want him coming home and having to milk the cows." I took my kids and put them in the manger. They loved playing in the manger while I milked the cow. But she had too much cream. Oh my God. I made butter, and made butter ,and made butter ,and I put enough in the freezer to last I don't know how long. I finally said I don't want to milk any more. The kids didn't like the milk. Her milk was too rich, you always had to skim it.

Agnes OK, so you were really busy during those years. What were you doing?

Betty Gardening, sewing clothes for the kids, bringing food to the guys in the field. I don't think we cut any grass because I don't think we had anything but quack grass.

Agnes But then there was involvement in the community.

Betty That was later on. I think Bernadine was a baby when I got involved in the community.

Agnes OK, so that didn't start until your children were a lot more independent. You mentioned that your children got very involved in activities as time went on.

Betty Oh, yeah. Gene was in baseball and he skated. He played hockey and the girls played piano. The girls were in Brownies and Guides. They didn't play any games like Gene did, but they were involved in piano and stuff.

Agnes/Betty Were they involved with church activities? I don't think there were activities in the church at that time.

Agnes/Betty Were there picnics? Oh, well, we did that. That was our own arrangement usually.

Agnes/Betty So you had your own family picnics. You didn't have a parish picnic? No, I don't remember a parish picnic ever,.

Agnes Could you tell us about your involvement with the church?

Betty Yes. I was president of the Catholic Women's League for several times I should say. That's being president here. I was also president for the Diocesan Catholic Women's League. I was president there for two years. I was secretary for two years when Mona MacGregor was president. I was also on provincial for two years but I gave it up because I couldn't go to any meetings, it was just too far.

Agnes All right. You were also involved in the community.

Betty I was involved with religious instruction. I wasn't a teacher, but I was a helper for about I would say 13 years. 10 years anyway. I was in pastoral care for 12 to 14 years. I worked as a Good Samaritan as long as they were in town at the Good Samaritan Mission. I was a sandwich maker and was told I made good sandwiches. Louis and I did Meals on Wheels until Louis couldn't go with me anymore and I couldn't do it by myself, so we had to quit.] I worked with the Slave Lake help when they had that big fire. I helped make lunch and also helped financially. I worked for the Breast Cancer Clinic for two or three sessions, and I worked at Riddles Store which was right across the road from us after we moved to town. So whenever I had an hour or two hours or three hours, I would go over there and work. I really enjoyed that. I like working with those people. I think there were six managers in those four or five years. I was a Lioness and Louis was a Lion—we did quite a few things in that organization.

Agnes Can you tell us about that farm family award?

Betty Actually, it was Father O'Farrell who nominated us. He said we should have got it a year earlier but that year Rosie and Lucien Guay got it. It was a day to the city and we had free dinner, free meals, free everything that was there. We ate with the Premier and the Mayor and so it was quite a celebrity thing. Then the bus brought us back to AMA and then we came home.

Agnes/Betty Yeah. And you were quite famous in our parish because of it. Just to us. Just because Father O'Farrell made a big deal.

Agnes OK, and that was in the year 1968 and the reason that Father O'Farrell appointed you had to be because of how involved you were with your farm, and all the work you were putting in.

Betty Well, he knew. He'd been to our house. He and Louis were friends before he became a priest. So he knew Louis. Our yard was cleaned up and we had a lawn at that time. We took some pictures on the lawn with our kids and the certificate. After that they gave really nice plaques for the Family Farm Awards.

Agnes Your children were also part of the celebration because they were involved in the farm.

Betty Sure they were.

Agnes Were they in the 4-H Club?

Betty The girls were, yes. But that was in their teen years but not before that. Anna never belonged. She went to some of the parties as an escort to one of the boys, but Diane, and Bernadine, and Elise were all in 4-H.

Agnes You mentioned a cabin at the lake.

Betty Yes, we bought the cabin in 1967 because we felt we were sort of cheating our kids out of their summer holidays. We couldn't go anywhere because we were too busy at that time of the year. So I would stay at the lake with the kids and Louis could go home and farm, and then come out to the lake and spend the night.

Agnes In the 50s and 60s, what kind of feeling did people have? Things were going good in those years and people were generally optimistic, I think. Did you have a feeling that things were going to keep on improving all the time?

Betty Well, it was because you made it happen. You raised more cattle, you raised more pigs, and you used fertilizer and got a bigger crop. The income was more and more every year.

Agnes/Betty Can you tell us about your retirement years? Oh, gosh, too many things went on before our retirement years.

Agnes You want to tell us more before your retirement.

Betty Louis was great at restoring cars—he restored five cars and a truck, and when he talked about selling the girls all said, "But Dad we thought we would get one." Really? He didn't think they paid much attention to the cars. He didn't think they cared but then he gave them each a car.

Betty We went to Arizona for 24 years. For two years we went for a month at a time because we built a new house on the farm and we didn't know how the heat would work. We had a different system altogether than the furnace. We also went to Mexico for medicine for Louis as well.

Agnes So those were your travels?

Betty Oh, that isn't all. We went to Spain. We went to Jakarta. We went to Bermuda. We did almost all of Canada.

Agnes Those trips lasted how long?

Betty About two weeks at the most. Yeah, except for Arizona, we were gone for five months.

Agnes During that time you also had a museum. You started a collection.

Betty Yes, we started collecting when we first started traveling. We did Alberta one summer and in every town we visited we'd look at second-hand stores and museums. When we got home we said, "You know what? If we put all our stuff together, we could have a museum too." So we got the barn ready and poured cement and put walls up for us to hang stuff. We had a fellow come out from the university to give us ideas on how to make use of the space. When we ran out of space downstairs, we worked on the upstairs. We had it for 13 years and then we decided to sell. We just said, "There is a time and a place for everything and right now we just don't feel like looking after it anymore." So we got rid of it.

Agnes So what was your part in the museum?

Betty Cleaning. Yes, and pricing and putting things down in our ledger, or whatever you want to call it. Yeah. My part was the hard part—the elbow grease part! It had to be dusted every now and then. Everybody always commented on how clean it was so we were pretty proud of that.

Agnes OK, then, thank you very much, Betty.

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