

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

Transcription of Gustafson-001.mp3

Narrator: Christiene (Chris) Gustafson

Interviewer: Marion Spencer

February 3, 2022

[Start of Interview]

Marion This is Marion Spencer, and it's February 3rd, 2022. I'm sitting here with Chris Gustafson in her cozy kitchen. Chris, would you like to start by telling us your parents' names, birthdates, and what your maiden name and your husband's name are, please?

Chris Yes, my parents are Edith and Eilt Apoll. They were born in Holland. My mom's birthday was August 20th, 1912. My dad's birthday was July 14th, 1913. We came to Canada in March of 1952. There was a lot of snow when we came and our home was in Peers, Alberta. The reason we came to Canada was during the war, on July 9th, 1942, a bomb hit our home. Everything was destroyed. My baby brother, who was not even three years old, was killed at the time. The war caused a lot of destruction in Holland. After the war things looked pretty bleak for jobs or for any kind of future. My parents decided to immigrate to Canada, which was very popular at the time. A lot of Dutch people had immigrated to Canada, and that's when we decided to come. I was born in 1943 and we came to Canada in 1952. I was eight years old and in Grade 2. My mom and dad had six children at the time. We came to a land where we had no power, no running water, and just lots of snow and cold.

Marion How did you get to Canada?

Chris We came by ship. It took 10 days on a Dutch immigrant ship. These immigrant ships had been transformed from navy ships to immigrant ships.

Marion How did you feel at the time about leaving Holland?

Chris As an eight-year-old? I was probably just excited about going on the trip.

Marion Do you remember details of the trip?

Chris I do because I was eight. I remember getting seasick for four days. When we arrived in Halifax, I had sea legs and I couldn't walk properly. I remember that very well.

Marion It seems to me you mentioned that one of your siblings actually had chicken pox during the trip.

Chris Yes, we all had chicken pox. Mine was all finished so I was able to stay with my dad in the cabin on the ship. Four of my siblings were in the ship's hospital with my mom. They were still recovering from their chicken pox. My baby sister, who was two,

did not have chicken pox. However, the day we arrived and saw land in Halifax, her chicken pox broke out. At first, they did not want her coming on land. But then they said she could come, but she had to stay in Halifax in a hospital and we could go on to Alberta. Of course, my mom said, "If she doesn't go, we don't go."

Marion So did you all end up staying a few extra days in Halifax?

Chris No. I think we got it all settled and we were put on the train. It took four days by train to get to Peers, Alberta.

Marion/Chris Where is Peers? It's about 20 kilometers east of Edson, Alberta.

Marion OK. And did you say this was in March?

Chris It was March 4th when we left Holland. We arrived in Halifax on March 14th and on the 18th of March, we arrived in Peers.

Marion/Chris Well, I guess you had your first winter experience in Canada! Yes, we sure did.

Marion So tell us about your home in Peers. Was this all arranged before you came?

Chris Yes, it was arranged through the immigration department and we were sponsored through the Christian Reformed Church. They had a home for us which was ready with the basics. They got us off the train and took us to the home that they had ready for us. Our personal belongings were coming by ship and it would take six weeks to get there. We needed things like blankets and a few dishes until then.

Marion/Chris So the people in Peers helped you out and gave you the bare essentials. Yes.

Marion That's great! This must have all been a little bit frightening because I imagine at the time you didn't speak English.

Chris No, but as children, I don't remember that part. My mom had taken some English lessons in Holland before we left because she wanted to make sure she could at least get groceries. She was a smart woman in that way. She knew a few things, anyway. But us kids, we went to school right away and my mom said after three weeks of being in school, we could get along with the kids at school. I don't ever remember not speaking to them.

Marion So there was no shyness or hesitancy when it came to joining in with the Canadian kids?

Chris There were a number of Dutch families that had also come to Peers, maybe a year or so before. In fact, there were three families and they had children our age. So, if

we had a question we didn't understand, they could translate for us. And so we weren't, you know, the only ones there.

Marion/Chris Did you enjoy school in Canada? I did.

Marion What did you like best about school?

Chris Well, I'm not sure. It was quite different because it was in a log school, and the games they played here were totally different. And I remember kids came to school on horseback and things like that. So what did I like about it? I don't know. Just probably playing with other kids.

Marion/Chris How did you get to school? We were in the town of Peers and the school was about a mile out. There was a bus that took us.

Marion What did your dad do for work once you got to Peers?

Chris The people that sponsored us had to make sure that you had work. Dad's job was cutting brush along the highway between Niton and Edson. They were just putting the highway through to pavement. And so that was his work,

Marion That was hard work. Was he able to come home at nighttime?

Chris He was there all week and only came home on the weekend. We did not have a car and did not realize the distances in this country. You need something—you can't get there walking.

Marion How did your mom manage with your dad gone so much?

Chris There were six of us children and my mom did what all mothers do. She took care of us. And yeah, I don't remember her ever complaining.

Marion If you lived in town, did you have any animals that you had to take care of?

Chris No, we did not, but we didn't live in town very long because the house we were in was not a very good place. My dad got a job at the railroad within the first year. When he got the job at the railroad, we found a bigger house to live in and moved out of town. All we had was a dog and a cat. My dad wanted to farm a bit, so we did get horses. He went on horseback to work for a bit until we got a car. I know we had some pigs and a couple of cows. That's what everybody kind of had. If you lived in the country, you had that kind of a farm around there to survive.

Marion Was your new home still in the Peers area? Did you complete school in Peers?

Chris Yes, it was in the Peers area—Peers and Rosevear. I went to school in Peers until Grade 9. We went to Niton for a year because there was no Grade 10 in Peers.

Niton was too far to go, so eventually, I went for my Grade 10, 11, and 12 in the Edson school, which was nearby.

Marion Were you able to live at home when you went to high school?

Chris I did, but during my last year or so I stayed with a lady who I helped look after her children. I went to school from there. It was right in the town of Edson.

Marion OK, so after you finished school, did you work at some job?

Chris I worked at a warehouse in Edson called Four Way Wholesale. They got their groceries and produce by a train that came through, and then it was distributed to all the stores, even Peers, which was quite a distance. I worked in the office there and one of the departments.

Marion Is Edson where you met your husband?

Chris Yes, Edson was where I met my husband. He was training to be a mechanic at a service station that was right next door to where I was staying.

Marion So, that's how you met! During the time that you were in Edson and dating, what kind of things did you guys do for fun?

Chris Besides work?

Marion Yeah, besides work!

Chris We belonged, or I did anyway, to the young people's group of our church. We had activities going on with that, whether it was hay rides or baseball games or . . . I don't know, you just got together and did things.

Marion/Chris OK, so I guess you met your husband when you were probably 18 or 19, then? Yes, I was.

Marion/Chris When did you get married from there? We were married in July of 1963. I was 19 but one month later, I turned 20. So, I guess I was just about 20.

Marion Did you stay in Edson after you got married?

Chris Only until November. My husband was apprenticing and after his fourth year as an apprentice, he became a mechanic. He became a mechanic in October, and on November 11th, he got a job in Edmonton in the Gold Bar area in southeast Edmonton as a mechanic. So we moved there.

Marion/Chris And when you moved to Edmonton, were you there for very long? We had four children there and moved to Athabasca in 1969.

Marion When you lived in Edmonton, did you work as well? I guess you were busy raising kids at that point!

Chris I worked for about a year off and on in a bank in Sherwood Park. That's where we were living.

Marion When you moved to Athabasca, was it for your husband's work? Did he get a transfer or were there more opportunities in Athabasca?

Chris He always wanted to have his own garage after he became a mechanic. He didn't want to be working for someone else. An opportunity came up in Athabasca. There was a service station—I think it was Texaco at the time, and they were looking for somebody to manage that. And that's how we ended up moving to Athabasca! I had no idea where Athabasca was at the time.

Marion When he went for his job interview, did you come up as well to check out the town before you made the move?

Chris Yes, I did come up with him. He was taking over from somebody else who'd been there. And to say that I'd check out the town, well, I had four children and the oldest one was five. I was at home, a stay-at-home mom, and it didn't really matter as far as what was going on in the town at the time.

Marion So what were your first impressions of Athabasca? Did it look like a good place to raise your family?

Chris That's a hard question because basically I really didn't want to go. I don't know why exactly but it meant leaving friends and family, and I didn't even know where Athabasca was. But it was my husband's job and where he goes, I go. That's how I was brought up. As far as opportunities go, I had no children in school yet so I did what we always do when we moved to new places. When we came to Canada, our family became the church family. That's because aunts, uncles, and grandparents are no longer in the picture when you come to another country. So, the church family became our family. When we came to Athabasca, I looked for a church that suited my needs and become my family. And that's what I did. That's where I found friends and they had children my kids' age and they helped us settle in.

Marion So this house that we're in today, is this the house that you had from the beginning when you moved to Athabasca?

Chris No. We lived in five different houses the first year. You don't think that was hard with four kids? [laughs]

Marion Why so many moves?

Chris There was nothing to rent at that time. In '69 and '70 Athabasca had no place to rent. Yeah, you couldn't find any place to rent. There must have been a boom on; I don't know. But finally, we settled. We rented a number of places. The house we're in now, well, we have been here for 45 years. So, considering we've been in Athabasca 52 years, you know, we've been here in this house a long time.

Marion This is home sweet home! That's great. So, I think when Aldor first came here, he was working for someone else, but everybody in Athabasca knows about Gustafson's Auto Clinic. He must have decided to go out on his own. When did that happen?

Chris When we first came here, he ran the service station himself as a mechanic. It also had the gas pumps at the time, right? He did that for maybe 10 years and then his health got really bad. He had a tow truck and he was always gone. It was a winter with lots of snow and he was always towing, so that's when he decided to get out. And so, Bob Lasiuk is the one who bought him out. Then Aldor wanted to move somewhere else and get a place. He thought Grand Prairie. But my boys were in high school and they all said, "We're not moving! Our friends are here." So he worked for Bob as a mechanic for about eight years. When Shawn graduated, he became a mechanic, and in 1984 he took over. He started his own place called Gustafson's Auto Clinic in the industrial park.

Marion Did the boys help him out with the business when they were in high school? Were they mechanically inclined?

Chris Well, Shawn became a mechanic and opened the shop with Aldor, but it didn't work out that well. Shawn was there maybe a couple of years. Kevin was just coming out of high school and he decided he wanted to be a mechanic. He apprenticed under Aldor. And of course, after he completed his apprenticeship and became a mechanic, he continued to work with his dad and he finally took over the business. I'm not sure how long ago that was, maybe 15 years ago. When Aldor turned 65, Kevin and Stacey bought him out. So Kevin is still there and it's still in the family. And now Kevin's son Colton is also a mechanic.

Marion That's great. At any point, did you have to help him with the business? Did you help with paperwork?

Chris I did paperwork for a bit, but it wasn't my thing at all.

Marion OK, so I know you mentioned you had four kids in Edmonton, but it seems to me you have six kids in your family.

Chris Yes. In 1977 I had another daughter here, and then in 1979, we had another daughter. So, it's like two families. And then in 1998 or 1999, my four older kids were grown and out of the house. The two youngest girls were in Grades 5 and Grade 7. I took a licensed practical nurse course because I felt I could still do something besides

sitting around. I graduated in 1990 and was a licensed practical nurse for 27 years up at the hospital.

Marion I know from a friend who works at the hospital that you were greatly missed after you retired. You had the reputation for always helping people cover their shifts and working shifts that some people didn't exactly want to work. So yeah, you made a good lasting impression with people at the hospital!

Chris I really enjoyed it.

Marion So how old were you when you decided to do this?

Chris I was 46 when I took my nursing course. I was the oldest one in the class. There were 14 of us that took it right here in Athabasca. If enough people took the course, they would offer it right here in Athabasca. It was a 10-month course and they paid me for taking it because I was improving my status or something. I was just a stay-at-home mom up until then.

Marion Well, I think it took quite a bit of ambition on your behalf that you took that on at 46! Good for you! With the students being younger than you, did you sometimes feel like you were mothering them or did they just accept you as an equal student?

Chris Actually, most of them that were in that course were older. I was the oldest, but we had a number of them that were only a couple of years younger. There were only two that were really young, like 20 or one was an 18-year-old, I think. Maybe they felt more intimidated with us older ones.

Marion They probably did. I just wondered if they brought their problems to you and asked for your advice.

So, with your kids kind of coming from two different age categories, there must have been a few years when the four older ones were still in the house after the younger girls were born. Do you have memories of any favorite family times that you spent together?

Chris Oh, that's hard to say. If someone would ask me if I would have done it any different, I would say no. There's eight years between the oldest four and then the next one. And in between, when I had my two younger ones, I babysit in my home for about eight years. So lots of interaction with kids and teenagers. As far as special memories, maybe just going on vacation once in a while. That was as special as it could get.

Marion Yeah, I bet. Yeah. So where are your kids now? Do they live here or other places?

Chris My three sons, which are the oldest, all live here in Athabasca. Two of them married girls from Athabasca. Two of the boys work at ALPAC, and Kevin, of course, works at the shop. So they've stayed right here. My oldest daughter, I don't know if you

know, but her family was in a terrible accident in 1989. She lost her husband and two children in a terrible motorcycle accident. She was pregnant at the time and did not know it. So we have a special miracle grandson from that. She has since re-married and has another son, and lives in Innisfail, Alberta. My daughter Sherrilee lives in Manitoba and has three children. My youngest daughter Laura, who just turned 42, lives in Bentley, Alberta and has three children.

Marion/Chris What is your oldest daughter's name? Kim.

Marion So it sounds like you've got a few grandchildren.

Chris I have 15 grandchildren and two of them are married. I have one great grandchild, and I'm expecting another great grandchild in April. Today is the birthday of my grandson in Manitoba. He turns 20 today and he was just engaged.

Marion/Chris The family continues! The family continues to grow!

Marion How did you feel the first time you became a grandma?

Chris It's hard to say. At the time I had my first grandchild, my two younger children were still at home, probably 10 and 12. So it was like having another! It didn't seem much different than having my own, especially when they were right here in town. I remember looking after them a fair amount. When they were sick, they would bring them to Grandma's house.

Marion It sounds to me that you spent a lot of time looking after your kids as well as other kids. I'm just wondering if your interest in taking care of others is what sparked your interest with nursing?

Chris Actually, I always wanted to be a nurse, but then I got married and had four children. So, when the opportunity arose that they were going to offer this course here in town, I thought, "Oh, maybe I could do that now." So, you know, that's kind of where that came. And apparently, I did not finish my Grade 12 when I went to school, so I had to take the GED exam in Slave Lake because you had to have Grade 12. And I did that

Marion/Chris Good for you! I thought, OK, if I pass this exam, it's a sign that I can take the course. And I did.

Marion With that GED exam, did you have to prepare for it?

Chris Yes, we did. The only thing that really bothered me about it was the math or algebra. It wasn't that hard.

Marion Did you have to know physics, and biology, and chemistry and all that stuff that nurses have to do?

Chris Not for the GED exam. That was basically finishing your Grade 12, right? Taking the course? No, it wasn't bad for homework and so on. It was only a 10-month course at the time, and now it's a two-year course. So, you know, through the years that I worked, we had to keep taking courses to keep up with all the changes that were happening. And, you know, now the LPNs do more. When we started, we couldn't pass drugs or nothing. Well, when we ended, so many years later, we're taking courses on giving needles, and giving drugs, and more and more. So it was a learning thing. You were never done learning, it seems.

Marion/Chris Lifelong learning! As changes come about, you know.

Marion/Chris Changes always happen in the medical field. What year did you say you retired? Okay. Yeah, I was 73 years old and I'm 78. So five years ago?

Marion/Chris Maybe 2017? 2017? 68? Yeah, I worked past my 65. I worked until I was 73.

Marion What prompted you to know when you should retire given you lasted so much longer than the 65th year?

Chris Well, I was casual. Mind you, you can work a lot when you are casual. I was healthy and I enjoyed it very much. So, every year I kind of thought, "Oh, I'll do it another year." And then my husband passed away the year before that. I was going to quit the year when he passed, and then I thought, "Oh, I'll go another year now, and, you know, nothing stopping me." And so that's what I did.

Marion Well, maybe it helped you get settled after Aldor passed. But it sounds like you really enjoyed your job, so that's great. I remember you telling me about a trip you went on back to Holland with your girls. Was that after you retired?

Chris Yes. Yeah, that was only like four years ago now. Yeah. Before COVID. We were just lucky we did it the year before COVID. My three girls and I went back to Holland. I saw the school that I went to. It was still there. I also visited relatives.

Marion/Chris That was really a special time for you and the girls. It was.

Marion How long did you stay?

Chris We were only there a little over two weeks, I believe. The girls, of course, all had to get home for work. We went in April during the tulip festivals.

Marion Oh, nice. It must have been gorgeous.

Chris Beautiful. And the weather was great.

Marion Oh, that is awesome! Have you done much traveling other than that since you've retired?

Chris No, not really. Not since I retired. And of course, COVID happened, and I hadn't been retired very long. So, no.

Marion When you think about it, you've seen a lot. You were born at the end of World War II and now you've survived the pandemic. Well, I hope we've all survived the pandemic! It seems to be ongoing, but I think it's getting better. So, in your retirement, what have you found that you like to do that keeps you busy and fulfilled?

Chris Well, it was quilting. I did a lot of quilting and enjoyed that a lot. It has only been in the past year or so that I haven't been quilting because my eyes have aged and are not as good as they used to be. I can't do the quilting anymore, so I have to find something else. But I also enjoy walking and if I can, I walk with a friend every day and we do the hills and walk for a good hour.

Marion Well, I think you've had a pretty active and interesting life. Really, think about it! You've got a really upbeat attitude, and you just dig in and get done what needs to be done, and you've worked hard. If you were to have any words of wisdom that you might like to pass on to your grandchildren's generation, what do you think that you could tell them about how to live a happy and successful life?

Chris Just be thankful for every day and to count your blessings every day because there are many of them.

Marion That's great advice! Thanks so much for sharing your life story with me. I really appreciate and enjoyed it.

[End of Interview]

Machine transcribed by: trint.com
Edited by: Marion Spencer
Proof-read by: Jan Thiessen

April, 2022