

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
Transcription of Edith Smiley recording 2016.mp3
http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/e_smiley.htm

Narrator: Edith Smiley
Interviewer: Mark Boersma
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[Start of Interview]

Mark Today, we're interviewing Edith Smiley. She lives at Pleasant Valley Lodge. Her husband's name was James Hughes Smiley. She was born in a small homesteader's house near Consort, Alberta. Her birthday is March 31, 1916 and she just turned 100 years old. She's going to tell us a little bit about her life. I'll leave it up to you now, Edith. You can tell us what you like.

Edith I was one of a family of seven. I was the fifth one. We lived on a farm and we were always busy with farm things. I went to a country school. We drove a horse and buggy in the summertime and a sleigh in the winter. We were two and a half miles from the school.

Mark How big a school was it?

Edith It was Loyalist School and it had grades 1 to 8. They were small schools at that time. We might not have had more than 20 students with one teacher.

Mark Were you on any sports teams or did you play baseball, soccer or anything like that?

Edith The girls played basketball in those days. The boys at school played softball. We had a basketball court and we sometimes went to adjoining schools and had a tournament.

Mark That sounds like fun. So where did you meet your husband?

Edith I met him when I was teaching school at Monitor, Alberta. His parents had a homestead out of Monitor. He was working for a farmer that lived not far from the school. I was teaching at Basin Lake and he used to come up to the teacherage sometimes, when we had softball games or something. That's where I met my husband when he would come up from another farm where he was working. He sometimes would bring an extra saddle horse and we'd go riding. That was fun; we used to ride into town, which was quite a ways to Monitor from Basin Lake School. But I had a sister in Monitor, so we used to ride into town sometimes.

Mark How long would that take you to get there on a horse?

Edith Well, I think it was about ten miles. It wouldn't take us very long because the horses would really run if we let them.

Mark So you taught grades 1 to 12? I bet you have some interesting school stories.

Edith I taught grades 1 to 8. We used to have a school picnic every year. The community would come in and we'd have softball games and lunch at the school picnics. Actually, it was hard times there and sometimes the army worms went through. That wasn't very nice when the country was filled with army worms crawling around.

Mark/Edith What are army worms? They're little crawly worms that take over the trees and eat all the leaves.

Mark/Edith They were also hard on the crops? Yeah, they were bad.

Mark Your mom and dad were farmers?

Edith Yes. Well, Monitor was a long ways from my parents' farm, at least 20 miles or more, so my parents didn't have the worms. I remember the army worms coming into the school yard, and then they'd climb up the house and of course, they'd fall down. Pretty soon you'd look and here were all these army worms. Sometimes it would be windy and tumbleweeds would come over the ground and pile up against the fence. When the tumbleweeds would pile up high enough, they'd go over the top and then the wind would be blowing the tumbleweeds. That was not a very good part of the country.

Mark So what was your favorite memory about your sisters or brothers?

Edith I was the fifth of seven children. We got along good together. We always had each other to play games or whatever with, but we were usually pretty busy. We didn't have time to play. On the farm we had cows to milk and chores to do. We had a good life.

Mark Can you tell me about the neighbors you had?

Edith I think the closest neighbour was a mile away. I remember our dog used to go over to their place and they didn't like that. We lived near the railway track and the highway was on the other side. One day our dog went over there and the boys there tin canned him. Have you ever heard of that? They tied tin cans to his tail and sent him home. He come down the railway track with these tin cans hitting the rails. They didn't want our dog over at their place. That cured him. He came home down the railway track yelping. I think he stayed home after that.

Mark What kind of dog was that?

Edith It was part German Shepherd, a middle-sized farm dog. It was good for cattle. The dog would go with you and keep the cattle altogether.

Mark Did you have any close calls with wild animals and stuff like that?

Edith There were coyotes around and there were other animals too. Coyotes would come and get the chickens if they could. The turkeys were the worst, because the turkeys would wander and if they got away, the coyotes would get them.

Mark Was that before phones?

Edith To begin with, we got the barbed wire telephone. Did you ever hear of that? They had phones on the fence. They called it the barbed wire phone. We were all connected, so if the phone rang, well our neighbors could listen in if they wanted to. If the phone rang and they were curious, they'd listen in to see what was new. It could be useful in a time of emergency, you know. It's good to have a phone.

Mark Did you have police back then, and fire trucks?

Edith If there was a fire, the farmers would go, if it was something they could do to stop the fire. Like sometimes there would be a prairie fire and the neighbours would all get together to stop it. They'd have water and get out and fight it. They would get tanks of water and gunny sacks or something and stop the fire if it was going on the prairie.

Mark/Edith Can you remember the police getting involved in anything back then? The police would check things.

Mark/Edith Did they have sheriffs or constables or RCMP? I guess they were there if they were needed, but I can't remember getting involved with them. But I think they were there in town, if they were needed.

Mark How big was your house?

Edith The house I was born in just had two rooms and an attic upstairs. I was the fifth, and by the time they had the other two, we had a bigger house. The house was enlarged and made twice as big with an upstairs instead of just an attic. It made a big difference.

Mark You probably didn't have a room of your own.

Edith No, I shared with my sisters. We had one end of the upstairs and the boys had the other end of the upstairs. Mom and dad had a bedroom downstairs. At first, before we enlarged the house, to get upstairs we climbed a ladder. When they enlarged the house, they had a stairway going up. I can remember as a little kid climbing that ladder. We got used to it.

Mark Did you get to see your grandparents at all?

Edith No. Mother and dad came up from Kansas and we're the only relatives in Canada. We did go down one Christmas when we were small. Mother took three of us down to visit and so I got to meet both grandparents. They were in the same town in Kansas.

Mark You might not have had relatives in Canada, but you had a pretty big family. There were seven kids and two parents.

Edith Well, there were five of us and then later on mom and dad decided to have two more. So, I have two younger sisters. I've got all the pictures in my book.

Mark I bet you have some interesting stories about school.

Edith We were about two and a half miles from school, and it was a one room school with grades 1 to 8. We always had a horse or horses to go to school. Some children walked, but we were lucky. We always had horses or ponies. If it was too muddy for the buggy, we could ride horseback. If there was too much snow, I think we could usually get through somehow. They didn't clean the roads like they do now. When snow came, they put the cars in the shed and put them up on blocks. They didn't keep the roads open, not for cars.

Mark Did they have rubber wheels then on the cars?

Edith Oh yes, they had tires, but they put them [cars] up on blocks. Then in the spring, when the snow was gone, they'd put them down on the ground again, pump some air in the tires and away they'd go. They could send in their car license and get a refund for the months they didn't use the car. In the spring they'd have to get their license again for their car.

Mark/Edith Did you learn how to drive the car? I was the fifth one. I didn't get behind the wheel and I didn't get my turn. I learned to drive when I was 50 years old, I think.

Mark How was the school heated?

Edith It was heated with coal and wood. The railway was there, and they'd get carloads of coal by train. The people would get the coal and get their bins filled up. Or sometimes somebody would haul the coal for you. We heated the house with coal and wood, but we lived near the railway track. When they put in new railway ties, there was all this wood. Dad would get the railway ties free for plowing the fireguard. They had to have a fireguard along the side of the railway track. That was our wood, because on the prairie, there were no trees. They had to go up in the hills to get enough to make their own fenceposts.

Mark Did you have a lot of animals on the farm?

Edith We always had cattle, horses, pigs and chickens. They did their work with horses then. We would be milking maybe four or more cows. They didn't have a lot of pigs. One sow might have a litter of six pigs. They would butcher one and they would sell the rest. We raised chickens for eggs and to eat.

Edith I remember when my sister and I were young, sometimes there'd be the little pigs and one would be too small and it would be pushed out. They gave us the runt so we would feed it at the house. Every time it got hungry, it would come squealing at the house, so we'd go out and feed it milk. That's all it could drink. That was our

pig, and my sister and I got the money when they sold it. That was our spending money.

Mark/Edith Was it hard to sell the pig? Was it like a pet? We knew it had to be sold even though it was our pet. We'd rather sell it than have them butcher it.

Mark Did you have electricity at that point?

Edith No. When did we get electricity? I know we had coal oil lamps and gas lamps that you would pump air into. The lamps had mantles on them. No, when I was home, we never got electricity, they got it afterward. So, we'd have to get the lamps ready to light before dark. When we got up, we'd light the lantern to go out and do chores. We lived the same way everybody else did.

Mark What's your favorite memory from school?

Edith Well, we had a one-room school, one teacher, grades one to eight. When I was a teacher, I went to Camrose Normal School in 1935 and 1936. They were much different than when I went to school.

Mark Do you have any special memories of school when you were teaching?

Edith I liked the country schools because the children were glad to come together and see each other and play. They wanted to come and see their chums. I had a town school before I quit, and it was a bit different and they weren't as easy to manage. I only taught about eight years. I got married and just didn't want to teach any more.

Mark Did you notice any big changes between the country school and the city school? How long did you teach in the city schools?

Edith I taught maybe one or two years in Monitor, a town school. The town children weren't as easy to handle as the country children because the country children were glad to see each other.

Mark/Edith Did you see any big changes happening over the course of the years that you taught with the country schools? I think it was about the same.

Mark What kind of nationalities did you teach?

Edith there were some. I had a little French girl that stayed with me in the teacherage because her district was closed. That was interesting. I didn't have a phone. She'd go to neighbors and phone. It was all French and I didn't know what she was talking about. She'd phone her mother.

Mark Where did you meet your husband?

Edith I met him when I was teaching at one of these schools. He was a farmer. Actually, the farmer he was working for was in a different district, but when we would have dances or anything, he would come up to the school dances. We'd have a

Christmas concert and dance, and sometimes there'd be Saturday dances in the school, and he would come up. That's where we met. Then he got so he'd come and bring a saddle horse and we could ride horseback. We'd go to Monitor about ten miles away. There was a town called Kirriemuir that was closer, but Monitor was a bigger town, and sometimes we would ride because my sister's husband was a teacher in Monitor. Sometimes we would ride horseback to Monitor on weekends to see them.

Mark Sounds very romantic.

Edith We'd get our horses. They were two saddle ponies from where he was working. I remember that he wouldn't let the one I was riding get started. He said if that horse gets started running, there's no stopping it and he wouldn't let me start out fast.

Mark How old were you when you met your husband? Do you have any idea how long you were married?

Edith I don't remember that. I never kept track. I'm 100 years old, you know.

Mark Do you have children of your own?

Edith I had two daughters, Laura Mae and Elizabeth Ann. The oldest passed away, but she left me three granddaughters. She was a smoker and had cancer of the lungs. She started smoking too young. At that time, the young people were smoking so much. She left me three granddaughters and my other daughter is still living, and she had four children. I've got quite a few grandchildren and some great grandchildren.

Mark Do you get to see them once in awhile?

Edith Yes, they're not too far away. Well, my oldest girl ... of the three girls she had, one is in Winnipeg, one is in Vancouver and one is on the Island, so I don't see those three very often. But I hear from them and we did get together a few years ago.

Mark Did TV come out when you were young or when you were a little older?

Edith We didn't have a TV. We used to listen to the radio. I remember listening to a Saturday night radio show. It was just a family show with all the same people and what they were doing. Not everybody had a radio in those days. I had a radio in the teacherage, and different ones would come to listen to my radio. That was one show they liked to listen to.

Mark Did you have electricity for the radio?

Edith I had to buy a battery for the radio. At one place, I boarded with a lady and she didn't have a radio. She bought the battery so she could listen to my radio whenever she wanted. When I was away at school, she could listen to these daytime stories, but she would buy the battery so she could use my radio.

Mark Is there something special that you remember about your husband?

Edith Jim was a hard worker. He liked horses. He was a good mechanic. He was a man of all trades. He could fix things and drive machinery and drive horses.

Mark Where did you live when you first got married?

Edith We lived in Monitor. Do you know Consort? Provost is the town north. Consort was the next town to the south and Monitor was next to Consort on the east. It was not too far from the Saskatchewan border.

Mark What brought you to Athabasca?

Edith My husband worked on the Alaska Highway. You remember how they had to rush and get that Alaska Highway built because they were going to keep the enemy out ... or whatever it was. He worked on the Alaska Highway and on his way home, he stopped in Colinton because he knew some people there. They told him that the storekeeper there wanted a driver. He went to the store and got the truck driving job. So, he didn't come home. He would haul freight from the farmers to the town and then load up with groceries and bring them home to Flynn's Store. He had a good job. At that time, there were no houses available to live in. When the war was over the people went to whatever job they wanted and then there was a house available. Flynn's let him take their truck down to Monitor and get all our things and truck me up here, to move to Colinton.

Mark That must've been quite a big change for you.

Edith I had come up a few times when he was working because he was staying in the hotel and driving for Flynn's. When we got a house, we moved up here. About that time, he got a job doing road work on the highway. He wasn't home that much. He was wherever they were building the highway.

Mark So you spent a lot of time by yourself?

Edith Yes, I was in town and I felt safe. I had the one daughter when we first moved. After that, I had another daughter, which I still have. My oldest daughter passed away. I soon made friends and taught school a little bit, just substitute teaching. I didn't want to take a school, so I would fill in if they were needing a teacher for a few months or a few weeks. I didn't want to teach all the time, but it was good to have a little money coming in.

Mark We went over lots of good stories. Is there anything that you'd like to take out?

Edith No, I didn't tell you any lies.

Mark How do you like living here at the lodge?

Edith I'm living a life of luxury. I've got my room. I've got my nice yard to look out at and everything's done for me. I enjoy life. I have made good friends with everybody that lives here. I know them all anyway.

Mark Tell me about your birthday party.

Edith My birthday party. Oh, that was a huge thing. It wasn't just my family. It was a house full of people.

Mark Being 100 is a major milestone. That's pretty good.

Edith My brother is 102. He broke his foot so he's in a wheelchair, but he's got his mind. He can play crib.

Mark So what kind of stuff do you do here for fun?

Edith I still play crib and we do art. That's my artwork. We had art classes with a lady who came in. That's supposed to be the Northern Lights. The other one is just watercolor. Every Monday night we went for art classes.

Mark I suggest that you keep doing art because you seem to be good at it. Is there anything else that you would like to touch base on before we wrap it up?

Edith I can't think of anything. What would you like to know?

Mark I'm out of questions for you, but I thank you for your time.

[End of Interview]

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