

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

Transcription of Chamberlain-001.mp3

http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/e_chamberlain.php

Narrator: Eileen Chamberlain

Interviewer: Peggy Baker

October 20, 2018

[Start of Interview]

Peggy This is Peggy Baker at the home of Eileen Chamberlain in Athabasca, on October 20th, 2018. Eileen, would you like to start off by telling us where you were born? And tell us about your parents?

Eileen I was born in the old Royal Alex Hospital in Edmonton in 1930, September the 29th. I remember hearing later that it was a foggy night on that day and Matt, a friend of the family, was coming to get my mom to take her over to the hospital, which would be about three miles away, which wasn't very far. It was foggy as can be. Mom supposedly said, "Matt, do you think you can go any faster?" He said, "No, dear, if we want to get there safely with this baby, I'm not going to go any faster." Mother thought he was dallying around, but it was very foggy. I was born just before midnight on the 29th and turned out just fine. I'm sure my mother was in the hospital for ten days and then came home. I had a brother that was four years older than I was. We lived south of Calder School in Edmonton. My dad worked for the railway and my mother had been a nurse. She didn't nurse after she got married. They didn't do that in those days. I was brought up in that district and really enjoyed it.

Peggy Where did your mother get her nurse's training?

Eileen In London, England. Yes, it was at St. Bartholomew's in East London, in Britain.

Eileen My dad was an attendant at the mental hospital in Ponoka and they met there. My mother had decided that she was going to come to Canada and marry some fellow who she knew who had moved to Montreal. His sister said to her and to them, "I don't think you should be getting married. You're not suited for each other." And so they said, "You know, we think you're right." They didn't get married. So there she was in Montreal and then she saw advertisements for nurses at Ponoka, so she set off for Alberta. I remember mom saying that when Hugh Barker, an attendant at Ponoka, gets back, he was with a patient on a holiday for about three or four months to see how he could manage to get along on his own out in the world, when he gets back, the other nurses said 'Slim' will take you out. Sure enough, it wasn't too long before dad arrived back and wanted to speak to the new nurse. They dated for almost two years, I think, and eventually got married.

Peggy That would be in the mid-20s?

Eileen Yes, it would be early 20s. So that worked out fine.

Peggy Then your dad was an attendant at Ponoka and then he got on at the railway?

Eileen He had three brothers who worked for the NAR [Northern Alberta Railways].. They went up to Peace River and Ft. McMurray and so he was able to get on there as a machinist. That's what he was for years, a machinist for the NAR Railway, now located off the St. Albert Trail.

Eileen Mom didn't nurse after she got married. They didn't do that in those days. She was a stay-at-home mom with me and my brother, who was four years older. We eventually had a younger brother who was eleven years younger than me. He was an afterthought. We decided maybe it was a New Year's Eve celebration that they had. We used to kid her about that. So we were a family of three kids and my mom and dad.

Eileen Eventually I worked in Edmonton at a couple of places, an accountant's office and a business office. Then a good friend of mine, Margaret McWilliam, a doctor, was working at a local mental hospital. She was doing a research job, just starting it. She asked if I would be her secretary and it would last for a couple of years. I did and I moved down to Ponoka, my mom and dad's old stomping grounds. It was great. We travelled all around Alberta. It was for people who had had syphilis and were treated, and they were doing a follow-up study about what they were doing now, years later. We travelled all around Alberta and did very well. That was a great experience.

Peggy Do you remember any of the results that she got from that study?

Eileen Well, it was very worthwhile. I'm trying to think of what they did, the treatment. Gosh, it's slipped my mind. That's what I'm doing these days, my mind is slipping.

Eileen I knew Lloyd, my husband. His aunt lived on the next farm from my aunt's out at Manola around the Barrhead district. We used to joke and say, I probably opened the gate on purpose, so I'd have to go on down to his aunt's place to retrieve the dog when we were both all visiting.

Eileen I went to school in Calder in Edmonton. Also the McDougall Commercial High School in Edmonton. In summertime, I used to ride my bike down Kingsway unless it was raining. I always listened to the weather forecast and so that worked out very good, that high school. While I was there, I applied for a job in the summertime at the Charles Camsell Indian Hospital. I remember the matron interviewing me and my girlfriend, who was a year older than I was to get this summer job. She said, well, you are 16, aren't you? And Gloria said, Oh, yes. Oh, yes. But I wasn't. I was only 15. But anyhow, we got the job and that was a great experience because it was with patients that had tuberculosis. My mom thought for sure I was going to contract tuberculosis while I worked there. It was great because I was on the women's ward and then there were about four or five cribs with little kids in them. They never got on the floor because it was not the thing you had to do. You had to rest, rest, rest, that was the thing. The girls never got out of bed. There must have been about 18 in the big room, it was a big classroom originally. I liked looking after those little kids.

Eileen One time one guy messed his bed in his pants and his diaper and so forth. So I took him out and started taking him to the bathtub so I could bath him. The matron came with some honored guests and said, "What are you doing, what are you doing?" She didn't like me, so seeing this, they didn't like seeing this bed, which was such a mess. So I said I thought I should give the little guy a bath first before anything. "Oh, well, yes, yes, yes." But she was upset that the honored guests would see this mess. That was a great experience. I went back at Christmas time and I worked on the men's ward and that was an experience because they were DVA [Dept. of Veteran Affairs] patients, and they would sneak out at night. I remember when two or three got together and another staff member stayed, and they dumped her in a laundry bag and tied it up. They were so bored because all they had was bed rest. There was an Indian chief who had a private room and he would sit beside the bed. He would just thump, something like this and chant away. That was kind of fascinating. He was a great man, an elderly man. That was my experience at the Camsell Hospital.

Peggy Did you have any conversations with them about being away from home for years? .

Eileen Oh, yes. They didn't like to talk about it because they missed it so much. Oh yes, they missed home very, very much. But they found out who had tuberculosis and they had to take them out for treatment. So that was sad. Being continually in bed was pretty hard.

Peggy The business school is where you learned your secretarial skills?

Eileen That and in high school.

Peggy So then you met Lloyd and?

Eileen Mom used to invite him over once in a while. He was going to university and she invited him over for Sunday dinner because she thought he wasn't eating properly. He lived in a boarding house right next to the Tuck Shop at the university. He would come and have Sunday dinner with us once in a while. So I knew of him. Then one time he phoned and asked me out. I guess he phoned. We didn't get a telephone in our house until just toward the end of the war. Anyhow, we went out together a couple of times, off and on. Then he invited me back to the boarding house where he was. At eight o'clock, I think it was, everything stopped. The boys came down from their rooms, from studying and so forth. We all had tea. Lloyd asked me to come over to see them that one evening. The fellows asked, " Well, how much are you earning?" They were more interested in how much I was earning than anything else. They were starving, I think, all those university students.

Peggy So at that time the war would have been going on???

Eileen That would be in the 40s.

Peggy Do you remember when the war was declared or any of the action activities?

Eileen My mom and my brother Ray and I had gone down to visit mom's brother, Uncle Ernie, who lived in California. We were on the way home just at the end of August. It was imminent that war was going to be declared. Everybody on the train coming back from California, they were all anxious. They knew what was going to happen, I thought it was going to happen and that was a sad time.

Peggy So you lived not very far from the Blatchford Field?

Eileen Yes, the airport. Yes, we were just a half mile or less from the airport. Two pilots came from up north and they landed short of the airport. I think they ran out of gas and they landed in the field between our house and the airport. My mom ran out. I think she was a little disappointed that the pilots were fine so she couldn't use her nursing skills. She got written up in the Edmonton Journal. She said they made her sound like a silly old woman.

Peggy Is that where the convoys went up to the Arctic to build the trail, to build the roads?

Eileen The Alaska Highway, yes, it was right next door to that.

Peggy Do you remember the convoys?

Eileen Not really, no. I don't remember the convoys going up to build the Alaska Highway. They were here and gone before I came here.

Peggy Where did you get married?

Eileen In Edmonton. I was baptized in the United Church, but I was confirmed in the Anglican Church. We were married in an Anglican Church, the Church of the Good Shepherd in Calder.

Peggy Did you move up to Athabasca right away?

Eileen Yes, we moved to the basement of the Fowler Block. It wasn't much of a place, but it was modern because it hadn't been built too long.

Peggy What was Athabasca like when you first came here?

Eileen You stepped off the sidewalk and there was usually mud if it was raining. There were no paved roads in those days.

Peggy What year was that?

Eileen 1953, it was the year I was married.

Eileen Athabasca was quite a small town in those days. It was on the old highway going through Colinton. It was the old highway that went through all the villages down that way, Meanook and so forth. The ski jump was right where the Burger Bar is now. That was quite something because they had competitions there. Very high caliber competitions when I first came.

Peggy What did you do for entertainment when you first came?

Eileen I belonged to the women's group in the church. After a few years, I started working for Lloyd at the office. He had some very good secretaries over the years, so he started his practice here. Yes, he practiced first in Clyde under Mr. Percy Davies. Lloyd articulated down there and then they opened the office here. It was in the old Olson Building.

Peggy Which one was that?

Eileen It was a two-story building across from the place where you rent movies. In that building there were two offices. The dentist was one side and Lloyd was on the other. The dentist lived in the building. I remember these things all of a sudden.

Peggy You said you had Chris first. In the hospital here?

Eileen Yes, I couldn't seem to get pregnant, I used to take my temperature every morning, like Dr. Brown suggested I do to see when I was susceptible to getting pregnant. I kept track of it all, but I couldn't see a variation. But she said, "Oh yes, yes, there it is, right there." It was quite a while before I did get pregnant. Then I had Chris. We'd already put our name in for adoption. We got approved, and then we had Chris. The next thing I know, we got a call from the welfare office saying they had a little baby girl for us. I said, "My gosh, I wonder if I'm pregnant." As it happens, I was. So we had those three kids. Bang, bang, bang. One adopted, and two natural.

Peggy You had your babies in the hospital here with Dr. Brown?

Eileen Yes, both Chris and Kim, that's right. Esther Page was in the room with me when we both had our sons. It was a pretty good town. I was very pleased to be able to be here.

Peggy So then you bought a house?

Eileen Yes, over there by the Roman Catholic Church. The owner was the druggist here and he was retiring and going down east, where he had a daughter. So they moved out and we moved in and it worked out just fine.

Peggy You were close to the elementary school?

Eileen Yes, but the house only had two bedrooms. There was an upstairs so we finished up the upstairs. We had two bedrooms up there too. It was certainly big enough for us.

Peggy Who was the contractor?

Eileen Oh gosh. Richards, yes, Bob Richards. It was a nice home, a very nice home.

Peggy I imagine you attended lots of social events at the old Community Center?

Eileen Oh yes, before it was even finished, it was just downstairs. Then we finished the upstairs later on, after a couple of years.

Peggy That was a big community effort, I think?

Eileen Yes, very much so.

Peggy Do you remember any of those big events?

Eileen We used to have the New Year's Eve dance there. And people's weddings would be there too. It was well used, you know, very well used.

Peggy When did you move up to the hill, to the high school hill?

Eileen 1970, late 70s.

Peggy So the school was up there? Not very much else?

Eileen No, Pleasant Valley was built much later. It was just the two streets, three streets and lots of trees. And the RCMP were the first avenue when you came up the hill. They had a sports day in the grounds behind me to the south. We had different booths and that sort of thing. In the summertime it was a special weekend. That was good.

Peggy I have a long list of the organizations that you were involved with. You were one of the charter members of the Chamber of Commerce right?

Eileen Yes, I was. Do you remember what year that was? Oh, gosh sakes. I've got it written down somewhere.

Peggy How did it come about?

Eileen Well, my husband, we both joined at the same time. I can't remember all these things.

Eileen I was with the Hospital Auxiliary, where a group of the women would go and embroider Athabasca Hospital, A H on the linens, like the pillowcases and that sort of thing, because everything had to be marked.

Peggy That's before you had special marking pens. It was all done by hand?

Eileen Yes, all done by hand by a group of ladies that went to the hospital and did that.

Peggy That's when Mrs. Beatrice Parr was the matron?

Eileen Yes, Mrs. Puyleart was from Colinton and she belonged to the Hospital Auxiliary. She and Mrs. Band would come from Colinton and help us do the stitching job. Mrs. Parr always had lots of stuff ready for us to do.

Peggy Were you quite active in the school when your kids were going to school?

Eileen I listened to children read at the school, at the primary school. That was very good.

Peggy And the Athabasca University Ethics Committee?

Eileen Yes. I was on that. That's where people would do research and it had to be approved and so forth. They would apply and we'd see whether it was worthwhile and ensure that any people involved in the research were treated properly and ethically. That's right.

Peggy Community Justice Committee?

Eileen Yes. I belonged to that for many years. We just quit about three years ago, two or three years ago, because we weren't getting any more cases. We would get them to the Justice Committee from the court system and we'd listen to them. We thought it was worthwhile to take them and assess some different things to do for a penalty. That was very worthwhile that way. They didn't get a court record. That saved a lot of young people, I think. Maybe once or twice we had girls. It was mostly young boys.

Peggy So, Eileen, when we were talking about when you found out, to your surprise, that the adoption that you applied for came through and they called and said that you had a baby girl. Do you want to carry on and talk about the whole process?

Eileen We understood when we put our name in that it would take at least two years before we ever heard from them. However, it was much earlier than that. It was unexpected, I guess. They said they had a little baby girl for me. I had been working on a case as a court reporter which had to do with a child, and I thought the call was about that. I said, "Well, who are you talking about?" And they said, "Well, you put your name in for adoption." And I said, "Yes, but that that wasn't supposed to come until about another two years because they weren't available." Well, we have one available for you now. Now.

Eileen I said, "Okay." So they said that she was born about six weeks before and we could go into the city and see her and make up our mind if we wanted to adopt her. Well, okay. So we did that. Lloyd and I went to the city and we met the lady that was looking after the little girl previous to her being adopted. I remember her saying, you know, you can say no. You don't always have to say yes. Then we realized it was us, they were talking about. My goodness, Lloyd and I really had to stop and think, do we really want to do this? Well, yes, we did. So anyhow, I think we were able to take her home with us. We did that and we were very surprised and managed to find a spot for her in the carriage. The crib was being used by my son, who was a still a little boy.

Peggy How old was Chris, your son, at that time?

Eileen I'm trying to think if I have it written down here or not. Oh, well, no, I don't think I have it here. Anyhow, he was a little boy. He was naturally born at the old

hospital in Athabasca. We decided, yes, we'd go along with the adoption and be just fine. Little did I know that I was probably pregnant at the time. It all turned out that I had one already and then I adopted one and then I delivered one. I had a miscarriage in between all that, so I was a very on again, off again, person. Anyhow, we had three children and that's what kept us going for the next umpteen years.

Peggy So it was Chris and then the new baby, Lynn, and then Kim?

Eileen Yes, all in the time space of a year and a half or so.

Peggy You mentioned earlier that they were still using the cage across the river when you came here?

Eileen I never went on it, but Mrs. Alice Donahue went across there every day. It wasn't really in use when I came here in 1953. But she had used it continually to teach school across the river. It was still there, but not in use when I came.

Peggy You were at the opening of the new bridge?

Eileen Yes, that's right. They used to have the little ferry that went across the river if you had to go north of the river.

Peggy Must have been an exciting occasion when they opened the new bridge?

Eileen Yes. It was. All the fanfare and the bands playing and all sorts of politicians. Definitely politicians who were representing Athabasca, Mr. Antonio Aloisio was a provincial representative. Yes, that's right. He was from the Social Credit Party.

Peggy Besides your three kids, you carried on working at the office with Lloyd?

Eileen No, I wasn't working with Lloyd at that time. I wasn't working at the office until after the kids were a bit older and I got a babysitter and then they went to school and that worked out fine. I'd always be home when they got home from school.

Peggy You were always very involved in all the sports I remember?

Eileen Oh yes, baseball and soccer and hockey.

Peggy Were you involved in sports when you were a kid or just regular things in school?

Eileen Percy Page was the principal of my high school. He was the one that took the Edmonton grads all over the world. They were champions. His son-in-law used to teach us basketball at the school.

Peggy What was he like, Mr. Page?

Eileen Very proper, a very proper person. Manners were very important to him. As a result, so it was to us at school.

Peggy Do you remember any legal cases that Lloyd was involved in?

Eileen He didn't like taking on legal cases. There was someone else who would do that or come to town to do that. He did mostly just real estate. No divorces and court cases and things like that.

Peggy So when your kids grew up and moved away, you got involved in every service job in town. I think Meals on Wheels?

Eileen Yes, Meals on Wheels. I was the community representative with Athabasca University on a research project. That was interesting.

Eileen We had the Good Samaritan Mission. I've been going out there for a number of years. We used to bag sugar and coffee and things like that. But now they do that on other days in the warehouse. I just go out there now to help them when they are serving lunch because they always serve lunch to the people that come to the mission to pick up their packages. I enjoy doing that. It's just once a month now. It used to be once a week, but then the government cut them back. Now it's just once a month, so it's not very demanding anymore.

Peggy Were you there right from the beginning?

Eileen I don't think so. I think they had been going for a little while. I don't remember when we started. Pauline Kramer used to come with me. It was very worthwhile.

Peggy So you've seen a lot of change since 1953?

Eileen Oh yes. I remember getting out of the car and stepping in mud because the roads were not paved. Mind you, the water always found a way to go down to the river. It didn't stay messy very long. That was a blessing.

Eileen There's been lots of changes for the good. We've had good representatives, especially in the early days on the town council. Tony Schinking was an excellent mayor. Lloyd was on the town council once and he really enjoyed it. It's been a good town to live in. The best place in the whole world to me, Athabasca. My kids all took part in various things and two of them still live here. Lynn lives out in Vancouver and she's in the top 10 percent of the realtors in her company. She's been that for over 10 years, 12 years now. Wow! She said she's going to stick with it for another three years and then she might retire.

Peggy It's amazing to think of kids retiring?

Eileen That's right. Both Kim and Chris are retired now. They find things to do. Definitely find things to do.

Peggy I guess we can wrap it up unless there's something that you'd like to add that we haven't covered yet.

Eileen I belong to the Community Justice Committee for teenage boys and girls. Instead of them going to court, they came to us. That way they didn't get a court

record. We would assess them penalties that they had to do. I remember one had to clean all the windows around the arena and different things like that. They had to do things like that which were different, and then they wouldn't get a court record. I think that was an excellent thing for young people.

Peggy You've been a member of the United Church forever?

Eileen I was brought up Anglican, American Anglican Church. It's all the same God.

Eileen I'm doing just fine. I keep busy and enjoy it. I'm fortunate that I have a dandy cane that I get along with, and it's just marvelous.

Peggy Lots of family around to give you a hand?

Eileen Oh yes, they'll come and pick me up if I'm going to the city or St. Albert, that sort of thing. So I'm never stuck to go anywhere. I enjoy going over to Pleasant Valley Lodge for exercises on Monday mornings. My grandson teaches us, so I get to see my grandson.

Peggy We'll finish it off. Thank you very much for taking time to do this great contribution.

Eileen You are welcome.

[End of Interview]

Machine transcribed by: trint.com
Edited by: Roseann LaPlace
Proof-read by: Virginia Nilsson

December, 2020