

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

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Transcription of Gladys Spence - 001.mp3

Narrator: Gladys Spence
Interviewer: Heather Stocking
June 22, 2022

[Start of Interview]

Heather It is Wednesday, June 22nd, 2022, with Heather Stocking and Gladys Spence. We can just start talking and tell me your story.

Gladys I am Gladys Spence and I was born on January 29th, 1945, in Athabasca, Alberta, the fifth living child of Roy and Bessie Speers. We lived on a small farm in the district of Willow Ridge, that's west and north of Perryvale, Alberta. I have fond memories of my childhood, being part of a large family and our small farm in the Willow Ridge district.

I recall the fun we all had in the summers when our cousins came out from the city and stayed at our grandparents' farm only two miles away, Flossie and Joyce Hetherington. We rode horses and played ball and hide and seek and enjoyed our summers. We picked lots of berries, all kinds, and our mother would can them and make jams and jellies for the whole hungry family.

As a young child, I recall picking many, many hours of rocks and roots when we cleared land at home, with my sister Marcella and my brothers Larry and Neil. The hay fields were mowed in the summer with a pole-type sickle mower. We then piled the hay into small piles, which we called coils. We coiled the hay and later into a larger barge, which was a large wooden box-type piece of equipment. The hay was then trampled down by us to make a solid large stack. One end of the barge was lifted open and the sides were pulled out and then they pulled the barge away to make a haystack. A lot of our summer was spent making hay, stooking the crops and preparing food for the animals for the winter.

We had a few cows, horses, some goats, pigs, chickens and sometimes turkeys. It was a real mixed farm. Then threshing season was always a big event in the farm life we had. Many farmers got together with their teams of horses and a threshing machine and hay racks, and they brought the stooks into the threshing machine. We always had a large straw pile after. There were always lots of stories shared at that time by the farmers, and always an abundance of food and fresh vegetables for everyone.

So, on occasion, on Sundays, we would walk to the Willow Ridge School house where we had Sunday school and church. Our minister was Shirley Johnson, Miss Shirley

Johnson. We all admired her so much. Those were special moments to us to attend Sunday school as a young child.

I began school, my formal education, in Perryvale, Alberta, in September of 1952 at the Perryvale Central School. What I recall clearly is how our first-grade teacher, Mrs. Zigash, led us in saying the Lord's Prayer every morning. We followed by O Canada, we all sang O Canada. We were so pleased to get a new pencil, scribbler, and crayons for each grade. So we all took very good care of them. There were no ballpoint pens at those early school grades. We had straight pens with nibs and inkwells to use.

And we rode on a big yellow bus, with benches along the walls and down the middle. It seemed like a long ride, we got on at 7:30 in the morning and home at 5:00. When the roads were not passable, after a rain or a big snowfall, we walked three and a half miles to catch the school bus at another location. We very seldom missed school because there was so much work always to be done at home. The wood to get in from the bush and bucked up in the blocks for the woodstove, and pig pens to clean and bedded again. The gardens to be weeded and cultivated. So we loved school and we excelled as students. All our family excelled and we didn't want to miss one day.

Heather Sorry, so when you talk about the bus, instead of the seats, it was like down each side and you sat looking at each other?

Gladys Yes, that's right. With our lard pails or syrup pails.

Heather With your lunch.

Gladys Sometimes we didn't have very much on our bread. Our mom baked lots and lots of bread, but sometimes we didn't have much on it.

Heather Just bread, sometimes?

Gladys And lard. And often we had lettuce, if the garden was still okay.

There is always a standing joke in our community where Marcella and I pulled the cultivator, it was a pull-type cultivator with two handles up. And we had a rope around the front of the hook. And there was one of us on each rope, on each side with a rope, and we pulled that, and Mom cultivated the garden like that. Our neighbor was going by one time and he saw us, and so he came back and he said, "I saw the sorrel and the buckskin out there today, cultivating." And there was always a big joke in our community about that.

At that time, we had no FM radios. We had a radio, that we got signals then on, and we didn't have it on very much because it was operated by a battery. But we would listen to Red Skelton and the news. They listened to the news and that. I can't recall now. There were other shows that we liked to listen to, too.

We lived before we had credit cards and before there were any daycare centers or nursing homes. We didn't have no dishwashers back then or clothes dryers. And to mail a letter at that time, it was 5¢ and that was a lot of money. And we got really upset when they raised it to 6¢ and then to 10¢. Gas at the time when we were young, really young, was 11¢ a gallon.

Heather And expensive then.

Gladys Yeah. Our family actually never owned a car. But my brother, as he grew up, he bought an old car.

Heather Larry?

Gladys It was my brother Neil.

Heather Oh, the first one.

Gladys So, anyway, when I was just a young girl, about 12, pardon me, 10 years old, we formed a 4-H sewing club in Perryvale. The sewing club was led by Mrs. Molly Lewis and Mrs. Violet Rein. I loved it. I loved all the things that we learned at 4-H. We learned sewing and we learned, you know, manners, etiquette. We learned speaking and, anyway, we made dresses and things. We started with small projects, but then for our final project of the year, we made a dress for ourselves. We had a beautiful, beautiful neighbor across the road from where we lived. Her name was Mrs. Lydia Nichol, and she always encouraged us so much to sew. So my sister and I, we could come over to her house. It was just across the road, and we would go over to her house and use her sewing machine because we had small projects for the 4-H to have done for the next meeting. She was a wonderful woman. Then our mother got a treadle sewing machine shortly after we started sewing, and what a fabulous step forward that was for us. I really enjoyed sewing and became fairly good at it at a young age.

We always got our sugar and flour in cloth bags at that time, and those, particularly the sugar bags, would be colored and they would be patterned with flowers and, you know, just pretty things. So we always were, they were strong, real strong cotton fabric, and we were always anxious for that sugar bag to go empty so we could make a new blouse. And I would make a blouse for myself and my sister. We could get one blouse out of a 100-pound sugar sack. I began sewing actually for myself for just simple blouses and things when I was like 10 years old.

I attended Perryvale Central School in Perryvale until I finished grade 10. And in 1961, our classmates were bussed to Athabasca and attended the Edwin Parr Composite High School. I graduated from grade 12 in 1963. I went to the city of Edmonton and got a job, and in one week I had a job and I was an electrocardiogram technician at the Misericordia Hospital. And I worked there and in the lab. I had my office in one week. They didn't have to take training or anything. They just trained you just there on the job.

And it was really just to operate that electrocardiogram machine. It was quite different than they are now.

Heather Right. You had to put all the leads on.

Gladys And I did. They had suction cups that went on. And I had to kind of read them, and then I had to distribute them back to the doctors in and around the hospital, to their offices and whatnot. So I mean, in a way, I thought I was pretty important.

In 1965, I married Ralph Spence from Perryvale. You know, he was a schoolmate, and we traveled around the province of Alberta for five years in our early married life. We lived in a small house trailer, and we pulled it with our own pickup. We moved 13 times in those five years. We lived in Fox Creek, Westlock, Perryvale, like back to Perryvale and Whitecourt, Cochrane, Peace River, Innisfail, Cardston and Manning. And each time, not each time, but often, we'd return back to Perryvale.

Heather And was that for his job?

Gladys Yeah, that was with his work in the oilfield. He followed the rigs around, you know, from there. And they had, sometimes we always had our own living area. We didn't live in it in a group. We always had a lot to rent and to live on.

Heather Okay. Well, that wasn't common, was it? For you, like for a guy to take his family with him?

Gladys Not too many did. No, they didn't, you know. I can remember our rent down in Cardston and we thought it was terrible. It was \$12 a month. That was quite a bit.

Heather Isn't that funny. You know, like, you look back, and, but if you had the money you have today for then it wouldn't seem like much, right? But when you're just starting out, everything's expensive.

Gladys And that was like when I was working, I worked at the Misericordia Hospital, but I was paid by a salary. I got \$190 a month, which was pretty good money. And then I worked in the evenings. I worked at an A&W, I cooked on the grill for a \$1.25, and then on weekends I would paint. Clean and paint suites for the apartment where I lived, for my landlord lady. So I actually saved up quite a bit of money before I got married. And then I got married and it was gone. But I do remember I bought all my things for the wedding and, you know, paid for the meals, the rent, everything. And I bought my dress. I made my bridesmaid dresses. I sewed them with a sewing machine.

Heather How many bridesmaids?

Gladys I had two. But I made their dresses so they didn't have that expense. But I didn't make my own. It was a beautiful, beautiful dress. I paid \$65 for it. It was the nicest dress in the window. It was in the window at the bridal store in Edmonton.

Okay. And then our last move, when the children were getting like four and five years old, they're almost school age, we moved back to Perryvale and then to the land that Ralph had purchased. He purchased a quarter of land when he was 18 years old. He paid \$4,000 for the quarter of land.

Heather How did he have \$4,000?

Gladys He, you know, he financed it. He actually financed it right through the fellow that he bought it from. He didn't have to get a bank loan and whatnot.

Heather Like a rent to own, kind of?

Gladys Yeah. And then we still live on that quarter of land. It's worth more than \$4,000 now though.

Heather Yeah, exactly.

Gladys And we moved into the house to live temporarily. And then we were always going to build a new house. We kept improving it and improving it. And we added on some rooms, and then we could never look back. And she was getting more valuable all the time. And this is the home we still live in, we've lived in for 50 years. You know, it's a nice home, but we know ourselves that it's pretty old.

We improved the farm and cleared a lot of land. And then we bought more land to build our small family farm. Six quarters and four quarters of leased land we have. But Ralph and I raised four boys. Darwin Glen Spence, born February 18, 1966. Bernard Ralph Spence was born January 22, 1967. Barton Curtis born June 16, 1975, and Tyler Travis was March 6, 1979.

I had a part here, I made my bridesmaid dresses. I told you that. I had no pattern, but I always had a vision. Yes, and this is what I want to tell you. At 13 years of age, I won a proficiency award with the 4-H club that we belonged to. And now there are lots of girls in it. And I was one of the very youngest, but I won this award for my sewing. And so I won a trip to the Vermilion School of Agriculture in the summer. It happened in the summer, but when the trip came, time came, I didn't have a ride because we didn't have a car. I didn't have a ride to get to the bus to get to Edmonton, to catch the bus with the other children. So the time came and I didn't get to go. But then a day later a lady was over visiting us and my mom asked her if she would take me to the bus, which was about seven miles down the road. You could stop the bus on the highway at any time then and just get on it and board it. And so she asked if she'd drive me to the bus. So she did, and I caught the bus and I went to Edmonton all by myself. And then in the bus depot in Edmonton, I changed buses and went to the bus and it took me to Vermilion.

And then when I got to Vermilion, I found out that the School of Agriculture was like out of town. It's about a mile out of town. So I'd take my little bag, and I walked out to the

School of Agriculture and come there. It was kind of scary because everybody else was there ahead of me. And then when I come there, you know, here is one strange person coming in and I had to explain my story. I must have been a good talker, because they kept me there anyway.

Heather Well, that's good. You know that people nowadays would, you know, give up at some point or they would call a taxi or, you know, hitchhike or something. They wouldn't walk.

Gladys Yeah. It was too far for me to walk by myself. And then if someone there walked with me, they'd have to walk back with me. But that's how it was.

I'll continue on with my story here. From 1976 to 1980, I organized and taught the denim sewing courses throughout the County of Athabasca. I taught in the centers of Athabasca, Grosmont, Boyle, Perryvale and Rochester. And this was a program that was offered to the Athabasca Further Education program. I made many, many pairs of blue jeans for my four boys and my husband. There's lots of people that still come up to me and say, "I remember when you taught the denim course in Athabasca or taught it here." So I did, I mean, I used to make jackets and vests and lots of things. I don't know where I got the time. I don't have any time now.

In 1974, I organized, I assisted in organizing, I certainly didn't organize it all myself, the Perryvale kindergarten program at Perryvale School. I took the early childhood courses through the education courses through the Lac La Biche AVC Vocational College. It was offered there by Grant MacEwan. I was hired as a Perryvale school teacher, playschool teacher for this period, that was from '74 to '76. We did many fun field trips and learning presentations. On one occasion, myself and some parents took our class of little children on a train ride from Perryvale to Athabasca. And we all sat in the open-air caboose. Isn't that something?

Heather Yeah, that is.

Gladys My goodness. Can you imagine all that now? That was a very memorable occasion. We had lots of fun.

Now, in our young married life, I worked side-by-side with my husband to develop and improve our farm. We purchased more land, bought more cows. We had a cow-calf operation, and, like a mixed farming operation. Many hours and days and weeks of hard labor. My husband Ralph worked away in the oilfield and on the gas plants, and he would go away, you know, and be gone, like for two weeks or a month and then back, and go again. I took care of things at home, especially in the winter. He went away in the winter to have money for the farm.

And on occasion he worked with his dad and his uncle on some farmland just seven miles west of Athabasca. It was land that belonged to his grandmother, and his grandmother was elderly. So Ralph's dad and him and his uncle Lester farmed it. And

we farmed that together. I worked with and helped him, we farmed for nine years. And then his grandmother passed away and they sold the land in 1974, and we could not afford it. We wanted it really, really bad, but we couldn't afford it. We were just young, you know.

So anyway, I said, I fed animals, calved out cows, and for many years in the wintertime, you know, by myself and with little kids. The one winter I recall, I had 55 calves on the ground when Ralph came home in the spring from his work and I had lost one, that was the 45th calf. I got my brother to come and help me with it. But I lost, we lost, it.

Heather Well, that happens.

Gladys I tell you. And now I tagged them, and needled them, and I wasn't afraid of them or anything, you know.

Heather Good for you. Did you have to pull them?

Gladys On occasion, yeah. But we put them in the barn all the time. Now we have them outdoors. I guess we calved earlier in the season, so it was cold. We put them in and out of the barn all the time, and we had pretty good, pretty good corrals.

Heather Growing up, we always calved early and so it would be cold in winter, right? So you're forever hauling a calf so they don't lose their ears or tail or something. And then when my brother and I grew up and we moved away, my dad moved calving to the spring.

Gladys That's smart!

Heather Why couldn't you have done that then though?

Gladys What do they say, too soon old and too late smart.

Heather Yeah.

Gladys And this one occasion that I was reflecting on my life one day and I was feeling really sorry for myself. And that was after I sent the children off to school and I was doing all the chores and cleaning the barn, which I did every day. I cleaned the barn every morning because we kept the cows inside and then you'd bed the barn after and whatnot. But I was getting really sad that my chores were done. I was sitting in the kitchen by myself. I was sobbing a bit when someone came to the door and knocked on the door and it was my sister-in-law Lillian. And when she saw that I was crying, had been crying, and she was astonished to see me crying. She said, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" I said, oh, I was kind of lost for words, but I seriously explained to her, I'm just sitting here thinking about making my own headstone. And she said, "Why? Why?" She was surprised thinking something was very wrong with me. No, I said, but in this world, we'll never know what I have done with my life unless I put it on my

headstone. So I was going to put on the headstone "This dear lady, she cleaned the barn every day, God rest her soul." Well, she laughed and laughed and laughed and she laughed. And that was always the standing joke. But at the time I was really serious, feeling so sorry for myself.

On one occasion, while we were working with cattle, I was herding a bunch of cattle down a narrow alley, and the big bulls were in the alley with the cows and they'd come to the end of the alley and they decided they didn't want to be there. So they turned around and they were coming back towards me and I just was trying to scare them. So I was kind of hollering at them and whatnot. Anyway, I could see they weren't going to turn around. So they began kind of pushing each other and fighting. So I scrambled up on the...

Heather How many bulls?

Gladys Two big bulls. They were like 2,000 pounds. They're Charolais. Actually we always had Charolais cattle. And anyway, I climbed up on the plank fence, but, I was up pretty good, but they're in there pushing and pushing each other back and forth, and they wiped me off the fence. So instantly I was underneath them. And my husband, the boys were yelling "Mom's under the bulls, the bulls are on top of her." So, as they were trampling, they didn't actually step right on me. They came down, and then my hips were... I had my feet underneath the planks because I was trying to get as close to the planks as I could. They came down on my hips and they really, it, kind of, hurt me there.

Heather You didn't break anything?

Gladys No, not at the time. But it was pretty scary for everyone. So Ralph opened the far end of the gate, and he let them go. And so the bulls were then going back the other direction, and I could see they were going to go in this here, in this, holding pen. So I scrambled up and I opened the gate to the holding pen and it opened. So they could go in that, and so here I am with the big wooden gate, and they went in and the one bull, he just kicked backward, and he gave a powerful kick and he kicked the gate, wooden gate, and it knocked me right across the alley and I hit a railroad tie, because our fences were made with railroad ties. And I felt that and that knocked me down. So I had a lump on my head by the time I got off the ground, I tell you, and I said, I've got to go to the house.

Heather You weren't dying, so you just got to go to the house.

Gladys I got to go to the house for the rest of the afternoon. That was a very close call for me.

Heather Did you have a concussion?

Gladys I don't know. We never checked it out, and put some ice on it and then carried on.

Heather Well, you're still here.

Gladys So the one winter when Ralph was away, and I was feeding cattle and whatnot, we had to sell these bulls. We were selling white Charolais bulls at a bull sale in Clyde. And you know what, I washed and cleaned those bulls and I fed them and I trained them. I washed them up and I didn't clip them, but I had someone haul them to Clyde for the sale. There was four bulls anyway. Then Ralph came down from his job in Slave Lake and he led them around the ring. And I said, well, for heaven's sake, I could have done that. [Laughs] They might have got a higher price if I had done it. And so, anyway, we do what we have to do, that's for sure.

In 1987, I went to school in Athabasca at the Alberta Vocational College here, it was a secretarial course that was taught by Lac La Biche, and it was offered in Athabasca. This course helped me lots. It was a year-long and I went, I did very, very well. I got honors. I show my kids those marks. Boy, I would expect them. It helped me a lot because Ralph had started a trucking company in 1988. And right from day one, I helped him kind of to organize and start the company. I did all the bookwork and the ordering of stuff. Anyway, it was a water truck and vacuum hauling service in the oilfield, which he operated for 30 years. And I did every single tax preparation and whatnot. I didn't do the tax and final tax return, but I did everything for the accountant for him from that. So it was pretty beneficial for that. But it wasn't my goal. It wasn't my calling.

Then in 1989 and 1990, I think, I went to a nursing course that was taught in Athabasca. In my younger years after high school, I had always dreamed of becoming a nurse, and like in 1964 or '63, I was accepted at the Royal Alex hospital for a registered nurse course, but I fell in love and that ended that. Anyway, I thought I would never have to work again in my life, so I didn't go at that time. But when this course was offered in Athabasca in 1989, and I noticed in a local paper where they were offering a licensed practical nurse course in Athabasca, it wasn't what I had dreamt of, but it was, you know, caring for people. It was a pilot project that was offered from the Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton for the rural areas. So at age 45 years old, I decided I was going to try it. I applied and I was accepted. It was 40 weeks long and we didn't even have a break. So it took almost more than, like it took, a full year.

Heather Yeah, nine months.

Gladys Anyway I graduated in June of 1990 and began work at the Athabasca Hospital from then on. And I took many other courses in the health care field to upgrade and improve my competency in nursing. For example, I took the administration and medications, intravenous therapy, physical assessments, and all kinds of courses. I worked with many colleagues and many patients, for 30 years I worked there, and I was nominated for the Laura Crawford Award of Excellence in Nursing in 2004. I loved my years of nursing. I loved caring for people, helping the sick and the elderly in a compassionate, professional manner. Just a small gesture, a gesture of kindness made them feel so much better and comforted.

I have been married for 57 years to my husband Ralph Spence. We raised a family of four boys, and I worked very hard on our farm for the past 50 years. I received the County Farm Woman's Award in the year 2005 for my honest dedication to the family farm and to the community and to my work. I have spent hundreds and hundreds of hours doing community volunteer work in all the communities within the county. Not all of them, but most, lots of them. I worked at the Athabasca Hospital in the field of nursing for 30 years. I was nominated for the Farm Woman's Award in 2005 and I got it.

Heather That was before they changed it to have, like modern farm woman and stuff like that.

Gladys Yeah, there was only just one. It was the year that Jackie Rae was our emcee out here. She mentioned on the radio the next day about me, because I got up and spoke and she remembered the things I said about cleaning chickens and silly things I said.

I've taken a very active part in volunteering in our community of Perryvale and am a member of the Perryvale Ladies' Club, I've been in the Ladies' Club for 50 years. The Perryvale Ladies' Club have been operating for about 80 to 85 years and never a glitch in them. You know, they always had a group of women. They started out, when they first formed, and they were making care packages and blankets and socks and stuff and sending to the soldiers in the war. And then they just continued and they did lots of nice things in the community and helping new mothers and helping all kinds.

Heather So it's still happening?

Gladys It still is. And one time the president of the club, she called me and asked if I would help at the bingo in Perryvale. So I said, sure, I'll do that. I was working at the hospital and Ralph was away at work with his trucks. So I went to help and now I've helped for 25 years, I've helped at every bingo, I might have missed six in 25 years. And at first I just did that. I learned to do the door, the money coming in the door. And then I did the calling for quite a few years and I'm still actually in charge of the bingos there.

I have the position of president of the Perryvale Community Hall Society and treasurer. I've been treasurer for lots of years for the Perryvale Community Hall. I applied for many grants and through the county and through the provincial government and we got a fair, you know, a good portion of them. And we upgraded our hall from a very, very deteriorated hall to a beautiful facility and it's safe, made it all handicapped and wheelchair accessible, and just a safe and a welcoming facility.

We traveled quite a bit, you know, after Ralph was not working, like he wasn't working in the summer all the time at his trucks and when his trucks were down. And they also had men running them, too. We traveled quite a bit. We traveled on a Caribbean cruise. I think we went on six cruises altogether, and then we were in Cabo San Lucas, Costa

Rica, the Dominican, the Hawaiian Islands, the Maritimes and Alaska. And then last year or two years ago, we went to Ireland, England, Scotland and France.

Our children all graduated from Edwin Parr Composite High School in Athabasca, and they all went on to post-secondary schooling. We now have eight healthy grandchildren who we share our love and laughter with at our many family gatherings. Life has been trying, rewarding, and spectacular over the years, 57 years. Our eldest son, Darwin Glen Spence passed away April 30, 2021, and is buried in the Perryvale Cemetery. I believe my loyal dedication to my family and friends, and my sincere compassion for people and my willingness to forgive, along with my quick-witted sense of humor, has helped me get through my many years.

[End of Interview]

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