

## Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

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### Transcription of Derko - 001.mp3

Narrator: Jerry Derko  
Interviewer: Heather Stocking  
May 25, 2022

[Start of Interview]

**Heather** I am Heather Stocking talking to Derko.

**Jerry** I am going to talk about my grandmother that had come over from the Ukraine. I can recall the stories that she had told us on the hard trip coming over. She had left the Ukraine. She had three daughters, but two of them were born here. She had three daughters and one son. My mother, which was born in the Ukraine, come with my grandmother and her husband, and they come out from Ukraine to Halifax in Nova Scotia. The reason they did that is because there was big ads in the Ukraine and in Poland to get land in Canada, which was just about free land. So things were rough in Poland and Ukraine at that time and still is. And it was at that time, it was still a communist country, too. So, anyhow, she had come over and got to Halifax.

From Halifax, she said they went on a train to Winnipeg, and then, when they got to Winnipeg, she said there was also a thing that said to come into northern Alberta because the land there was next to nothing. I think it was, if I could recall, five acres of land, but you had to clear two acres and then you could get the five acres. Plus the next year, if you cleared it up, you'd get the full quarter. So anyhow, as she said, they got from Winnipeg to Athabasca on a train.

When they got off the train, she said it was late, late in the fall and they handed her and her husband, my grandfather, there was five items. There was a saw, an axe, a hoe, a rake, and I can't recall what the fifth item was. She said there was five items anyhow that they gave, and put them in the wagon and drove out into the country, which was in the Paxson area, that we call now the Paxson area. And she said they dropped them off in the bush.

She said we had to build a house, because we had no house and we had no nothing. So they walked to their neighbors. Wherever they dropped them, there was some people that lived there that had built a little shack, and they kept them there for the winter. They helped to clear a little bit of brush and then started doing logs, so they could build their house for the next summer. So she said they did build a little bit of a house, but it was really rough going, because, like I said, they only had those five items.

So a guy came to do an inspection and to check how much they had cleared, and they had only cleared a little bit because they were trying to build their house at the same

time. But he signed it and said, hey, you're trying, you're doing the best you can. So he signed the thing off and told them they had the full quarter of land, which was marked off on the thing. But she said it was between them and the neighbors that they finally got their little house built for the next winter. And then eventually from there, they stayed there for a few years and then moved to Donatville. That's at the junction of Highways 63 and 855 is where they had moved to, and it's still there, the original place. Not the original house, but the place is still there where they lived.

**Heather** And how old would your mom have been at that time?

**Jerry** When my mom first come here, I think she was 12 or 13. And then, anyhow, by the time everything had got finished, they were probably out there for about five or six years. Because that's how my dad met my mom. My dad lived in Vimy and his parents farmed in Vimy, and my uncle Nick Semenchuk lived in Grassland and my dad wanted to come to work for him because it was hard to find work. And Uncle Nick had a store and he had a truck that would do odd work for different people.

My dad's dad's name was Mike Derko and they lived in Vimy. They lived along the highway and they got to be known later on in life, as that's where it was quite a stop for people that were going to Edmonton. Because there was no road between Boyle and Grassland. It was all muskeg. They had to go through to Paxson area, to Colinton, and then get on number two highway to go to Edmonton at that time. So anyhow, dad only had a bicycle. He didn't have a vehicle, so he rode his bicycle from Vimy and then he happened to stop at where my mom was living, which was Postoluks at that time, for a drink of water because he still had another ten miles to go to Grassland. He didn't really know how far he had to go.

But anyhow, he and dad always laughed about it. He said that he could see this pretty lady that was there. So he thought, well, I'd like to get to know her, I guess. Anyhow, he said he had his drink of water and then peddled onto Grassland and then a couple of days later he thought, well, maybe I'll peddle back to Donatville, where they were, and see if I can see her again. And that's how they met. Then that was in 1940, because I was born in '41. Because in '41 my dad went to the army, maybe in 1939, and then my dad got called to go to the army, him and his brother.

When my dad was in the army, he wasn't there too long. Whatever they were in, this brigade or whatever it was, rolled and he broke his back. So he couldn't go on the front lines or anything, but my Uncle Joe did go out to do the front lines. So they put my dad in the kitchen or the soup area where he had to peel potatoes, just light duty, and he stayed there and you had to put your time in in the army.

Then he saved a little bit of money by the thing and my mom did odd work. There was nothing in Grassland, really, just the store, maybe two stores. But, anyhow, you put your name in to get a truck. Dad wanted always a truck, and you had to put your name down because it was hard getting vehicles at that time. Seeing that he was in the army, they had given him one of the first choices of getting one. So when he did get home after two

years serving in the army, there was this brand-new Ford truck sitting in the yard. So then he started trucking. He was hauling pigs and different things from Grassland to Edmonton, which, like I said, had to go through Paxson and on.

**Heather** And so people would hire him to take their... ?

**Jerry** Haul their livestock, and he'd go from farmer to farmer and pick up a cow here and a pig there, and cream. Cream was one of the big things, in cream cans you'd take to Edmonton. And then he started selling gas out of barrels, where you had a hand pump and then you filled their little containers or whatever. So that's how he got started in the fuel business. I remember myself turning the crank and filling. Guys would come with little cans or jugs, and filling that up. At that time, a barrel of gas was \$7 and some cents for 45 gallons, 205 liters. And just over \$7, and Dad had to haul that gas from Calgary in drums, and he could put 13 drums on the back of the truck, because it was only a one ton or ton and a half truck. But obviously it paid to haul it from Calgary.

I remember him saying, and that's when it was probably in about 1944 or 45, when they kind of made a road between Donatville and Boyle that would hook up to Grassland. It crossed the muskeg there and they put corduroy, which was like blocks or logs of wood on the road. He said you'd drive through, then you'd break through. He said he'd have to unload half the drums or all the drums off the truck, and then get yourself out, and then load them back up again. I recall him saying that would be three to four days to go to Calgary and back.

**Heather** So did he actually open like a gas station then?

**Jerry** Eventually he started and he put up a pump in Grassland, and in Grassland at that time there was no power. Well there wasn't even a telephone. The telephone come in later. Dale Milot had a power plant that he had in Grassland. It was a big diesel engine and they put up power poles and hooked houses up. But Dale, at 10:00 in the night, he shut the power plant off because he was ready to go to bed, so he wouldn't run it all night. The only thing is, I recall that on either a Friday night or a Saturday night, when Dale and Yvonne decided to have a little party, all the power would stay on 'til two or three in the morning 'til he decided to go to bed. The same thing on Sunday. The power wouldn't come until late Sunday afternoon or Sunday morning at noon, or after they went to church first.

**Heather** So you lived by his schedule.

**Jerry** We lived totally by his schedule for power. But we didn't have anything we needed power anyhow, besides a light. We didn't have no fridge. Our fridge was in a well and in a pail. And then you put your stuff in the pail and put it down in the well to keep it cool.

**Heather** Sorry, when were you born?

**Jerry** I was born in 1941. One boy and I had three sisters and then a brother, which was later on in life. We had a phone finally come in, and our phone number was number seven. And it went, I think it was four shorts and three longs or something like that when you'd think, but everybody could hear it ring. So it was just like a party line between how many houses there were. We were in number seven, so there was probably, I think it only went to number nine or twelve. So that's how many phones were in Grassland at that time.

A skating rink was built in Grassland. I remember Dale Milot had got a tank, had found a tank or maybe got a tank from somebody, like a 500-gallon tank or 300-gallon tank. He put it on a sleigh and then put a barrel inside of that tank so he could burn wood in it. Then there was a little slough out of Grassland, about a half a mile or quarter mile out Grassland. And you'd go and take water out of that slough and put it into the tank and then heat it to put on the skating rink, to put on a thing, to make the water to be warm, a little bit warm, anyhow.

Then we had about three teacherages in Grassland, because at one time Grassland drew kids from all over the place, just about from Wandering River, because there was no schools anywhere. There was a bunch of little schools, but they had been closing them down. So even Amber Valley kids come to the Grassland school. So, at one time, we had over 400 kids in the Grassland school, and so they built about three or four teacherages.

My dad by that time was in the fuel business, and we'd fill up a barrel and I'd take it on a sleigh. But the smaller barrels, 25-gallon barrel, take it on the sleigh and then push the barrel up to behind the teacherage and then hand pump the 25 gallons into it another barrel that fed their teacherages for heat. Like fuel, you know? And then I packed water. That was one of my jobs too, as teachers would hire me to haul water to their house.

Later, I think I was 18, actually I started driving a truck when I was 17 years old hauling freight from Edmonton, and also doing what my dad did to pick up cattle and pigs and cream from farmers around the area, but not from my dad, from another guy, Walter Corse, that bought the truck from my dad and I went to work for him.

**Heather** And then how do you spell his last name?

**Jerry** Corse.

Walter had a couple of trucks, and then, when I turned 18, dad bought a REO truck, a six-cylinder REO gas job, and we had a 3,200-gallon tank, and I started hauling fuel to Yellowknife. I don't know how dad ever got this haul to go to Yellowknife for Rempel Trail, but 3,200 gallons to haul to. We did a lot to Hay River, which would be put onto the barge. The fuel would load on the barge and then we'd come back into Edmonton. But I remember going to Yellowknife, and dad paid me. Yellowknife and back was 2,000 miles, a thousand miles each way, and it would take seven to eight days, and I'd sleep in the truck which had no sleeper or nothing, just a small cab. In fact, you could sit in the

driver's seat and turn the passenger window down. That's how narrow the cab was, and you'd sleep in there for your seven, eight days to make a round trip.

**Heather** Was it a bench seat at least?

**Jerry** Yes, it was. The other part was bench and this was a bench seat so you could lay down. But your knees were always cramped, and dad paid me 5¢ mile, which was \$100 a trip. And like I said, it took seven to eight days to make this trip. But you know, that \$100, I still was able to put some money away because I did buy a car in 1955, a Chev car. But I could recall going to stop, like in Valleyview or at the truck stops, having a bowl of soup. This was my favorite, tomato soup, have a tomato sandwich, and a bottle of Orange Crush pop, and it would be 90¢, for all the three items. And I usually give a dollar, and then you'd let the waitress keep the 10¢. So they'd get to know you, like I pretended I was a big spender I guess to give the 10¢ tip.

Maybe we never made no money, but it didn't cost us money to live. You know, I can recall buying ten cans of sardines for a dollar and a loaf of bread and then, you know, open a can of sardines and eating sardines for maybe half the trip or whatever, you know. Like I said, according to the money, it was reasonable. I did that for a while and it was like you said you'd work 16-, 18-, 20-hour days. But in the summertime it was good because up north in Yellowknife, it was daylight just about 24 hours. So you're always going towards the sun and with brights you could go 18 hours a day and think nothing of it. But at that time there was no rules or regulations or anything. That was in 1959 when dad bought that REO. In 1960, I bought the truck from my dad because I was going to be on my own with my big truck, and I stayed hauling for Rempels and just hauled fuel.

I got married in 1963. Before that, I was living in Edmonton, going back and forth from Grassland to Edmonton. But then in '63, when I got married I moved back to Grassland and I've been in Grassland all my life, I guess I can say.

**Heather** Was your wife from Edmonton?

**Jerry** My wife was from Boyle. When we went to school, Boyle was our rivalry at school, in sports and all that. We always tried to beat Boyle and she was quite the sports girl, so we always had little rivalry deals. Yeah.

**Heather** And so you knew her before then?

**Jerry** I knew her, yes, quite a bit.

**Heather** Had you dated before or was that something that came?

**Jerry** Probably for a year and then she moved to Edmonton, and then I did keep dating her when she moved to Edmonton and she went to work for the government. Then we got married and then she moved back, then we had the two boys.

I built a service station in 1967. So we had only been married probably for about four years, and then we built a Husky car/truck stop. It was on the McMurray highway, and in 1967 is when the highway opened up that winter and we built it that summer. The Husky truck stop, which was a restaurant and a garage, and my wife run the restaurant, which she didn't like.

Then that winter, the McMurray highway opened up, and then Nick Fedorchuk built the one in Wandering River, the Esso. Nick Fedorchuk used to work for my dad prior to that, and then he moved to Wandering River and built a service station there. But that was in the winter. So actually my dad and myself had the first, really what you could say, was a truck stop on the McMurray highway and that was in 1967.

**Heather** You had to have been busy.

**Jerry** We were so busy when it opened up, it was unreal. I remember when guys were coming from McMurray, when they get off work, some would get off work on Thursday but mostly Friday. They could line up, guaranteed they were lined up for a half a mile or not better to get gas, and if you come from Edmonton, you couldn't get into the gas pumps this way. You'd have to go all the way to the end and get in line to come in to get gas. And it seemed like 80% of the guys that were on there were drinking. There was more booze and fixing gas tanks because it was all gravel road. We could patch a gas tank with Seal-All and paper towel. The brown paper towel because it had a little bit of fiber in it. We had a hoist in our garage and you put that on the thing. And some of them, oh, there would be just gas pouring out and you could smell gas through the restaurant and everything because it was all put together.

Then, in about '69 or so, we rented the restaurant out to Joe and Ann Semashkewich and they run that probably for 20 years total. We kept the car/truck stop. I forget what year we sold it, probably in about 2010. So probably had it for about 35 to 40 years.

I lived in a trailer. We had a mobile home we pulled in behind the service station and lived in it. It was just too hectic, because guys would be getting you up in the middle of the night for gas and then fix tires. And there was no water in Grassland to speak of at all. And seeing that Ellen my wife was originally from Boyle, and she was from the Yugoslavian descent, which believed that the youngest in the family should be looking after their parents. So we moved to Boyle, built a house in Boyle, in 1974, and then her mom and dad moved to Boyle, just down the street from us.

She was the youngest in the family, and she got bone cancer and she died. She was a very young lady, just 50, and she passed away. She suffered, she couldn't do anything for quite a few years. Her mom and dad lived just down the street from us, and they had a real rough time because she was the baby of the family. The Radmanovich family, she was a Radmanovich, were very successful farmers there. Some of her uncles, her brother were in business in town and owned Central Sales and different businesses, and built a hotel in Boyle. They were a very successful family, but it was a hard, hard time.



The boys, Darren, the oldest, was already in university. Colin just started university. He did start teaching, by golly, he did have his teaching degree. He just started teaching. And then, when she passed away, he said he was going to come and stay and work with me and help me out for a year or two, and he's still here.

Darren, my oldest son, went to be a policeman because he always wanted to be a policeman. When the kids would play, he was always the policeman of the cops and robbers. He's worked his way up, and he's a deputy chief now.

**Heather** With the Edmonton police service?

**Jerry** Yes, the city police force. Yeah, the boys were good, but it was rough being, you know, just the single parent. But the boys, I have to admit that they were excellent boys, you know, never did really get into trouble or anything. And myself, it was, I was a little leery at first. I thought I was going to be a fifth wheel. But I've had so many friends and grown up there, knew everybody in the area that I fitted right in with everybody. So there was no reason for me to remarry or anything like that because I had all the friends I wanted. And so I stayed single till today, and now it's too old to get married, right?

**Heather** Yeah.

**Jerry** You know, I didn't do anything. Business was my number one thing. I wanted to be successful in business. I was always, always scared of going broke because, you know, and I remember, I expanded up quite a bit. At one time, I probably run 20, 25 trucks and then the interest rate went to 20%. Just before that, I had sold a bunch of different trailers, because I was working for Shell Oil out of Edmonton, and I knew it was always with Husky here. I just thought, you know what, I've got to make up my mind. Am I going to be out of Edmonton or am I going to be in Grassland, which I was fortunate to get rid of a bunch of my stuff at 20% and 22%, otherwise guaranteed I would have went broke. All right, everybody else or not everybody, but a lot of people did. But yes, the interest rates were very high, 18, 20%.

Then, when we were here, I always had trucks and plus the service station plus the bulk end of it. And then I took my trucks up north. A few of them, like to Norman Wells to haul on the ice roads and haul out of that refinery and just stay there with the boys for the winter. I was fortunate and I had one of my cousins, first cousin, come in as a partner with me, him and his wife. So between him and my wife, they run the business while I took the trucks and went north. And then we hauled to these little Indian villages up there for, you know, two months of the winter, because the roads, they were just winter roads in there.

I was fortunate enough that I met a guy up there in Norman Wells that owned a construction company, and he would be looking after the North Warning Systems. He was a contractor for the government that did a lot of work with NORAD, the North Warning System. So he phoned me one summer after I'd been there in the winter for a

few winters, and he asked me what I was doing. And I said, I never did let him know that I had a service station or anything like that. I kind of kept that quiet all the time. I said, I'm starving to death. Why? He said, good for you "you son of a b" he said, I've got a job for you. He said, how'd you like to come in and look after some men for me? He says, you'll have your own plane, have a pilot, get a DC-3 plane, and he said, you can meet this pilot in Yellowknife and then start in Tuktoyaktuk and go right across the whole north from North Warning System to North Warning System.

And these domes, radar domes that they had, we had to build a platform for the bottom part of it. I didn't have to put the dome up, but I had to straighten them out. Some of the platforms were built, but we had to build a lot of platforms. So that's what I did. I did talk to my partner and my wife, again, and they said, yeah, you got a chance, go up there.

So I flew to Yellowknife. I meet this guy. Rocky was his name, this pilot. We had an old DC-3 plane, them silver ones, an old army silver plane. It was a 1952 plane. It was an old, old plane. And anyhow, we left Yellowknife and went straight to Tuktoyaktuk. Then from Tuktoyaktuk we went to Cambridge Bay, Hall Beach, all them northern points where the NORAD system was, right to at that time it was called Frobisher Bay. So I did get to do the whole north end of it, which was very, very interesting.

I can recall on one of our trips we were in Shepherd Bay and we had to go to Hall Beach, that's where the big planes were that could come out of Edmonton. There was a big airport there, not big, but it was a bigger airport. And I had ordered paint and railway ties to put underneath the steps to kind of level things off, so we had some railway ties, paint and shovel, and different things because I had about eight or ten guys working for me. So anyhow, it's daylight 24 hours a day and the sun's kind of always up there and Rocky said he'd like to fly at night because it would cool off. So anyhow, we flew from Shepherd Bay to Hall Beach, loaded all this stuff up at about three in the morning.

Every time we'd stop at different places, old Rocky would get out and he had a five-gallon pail of oil, and he'd always have to add oil to one side of that engine. You know, I didn't think anything of it. So anyhow, at Hall Beach he helped us load. There was another guy, Rod, Rocky and myself. So on the way back we had all these railway ties in the back of the plane and everything, and I'm sitting in the passenger seat and I had the headphones on. By this time, I kind of fell asleep because it was five in the morning or whatever, four or five. All of a sudden the plane starts going grrr, grrr, grrr, shaking to beat heck. I wake up and look, it quit shaking, but my propeller sitting like this, straight up and down on my side.

Well I got all excited and I called Rocky, look out the window. He said, I know, put your headset on. So I put my headset on and he's telling me, he said, I shut the engine off because I can't hold it with one engine. We're starting to lose altitude. But he said, can you look and see if there should be an abandoned radar site around here, because you had nothing. You had no maps or anything. He just knew the north, as all he ever flew was in the north. So Rod, in the meantime, gets up too because everything is shaking. Rocky says, open the door and throw some of that stuff out, hey. So I said, Rod, you've



got to open that door, and he says, I'm not opening that. Him and I get arguing back and forth. In the meantime, Rocky is hollering at us, open that door, because we're going down, hey. And I said, Rod, I'll never forget that, Rod, you're a single man. I got two kids at home for Christ's sake. I'll hang on to your boots, I said. You know, let's go and open that door. You know. So anyhow, he did, he crawled over on the ties that were in there, and he opened the door you know, and it was just like opening that door. The wind just went right by. I thought it would be like a jet to suck you out. But it didn't. So we started throwing stuff out. And I can recall Rocky saying, oh that's enough, I can control it. I said, have him, boy, I said. We threw everything out, everything, the shovels, the bait. [Laughter] Every damn nothing. We had nothing in the cab.

Anyhow, he did find an old, abandoned site and he put it down. What had happened, the plug would foul up. It was a rotary engine, and the plugs would foul up because it used oil, and that's why he kept adding oil all the time and the thing, and then he changed the plugs. Every time he'd do that, he changed the plugs and he put it like in a coffee can, with some cleaner in it. And then the next time he'd take his wire brush out and then use the plugs that were in there, and then replace the plug thing. But he didn't do it at Hall Beach, thinking that we were going to make it back. So he did that and away we went.

**Heather** So that stuff is still sitting out there somewhere.

**Jerry** If you ever hear of a rail going across the Arctic, that's our ties. It's between Hall Beach and Shepherd Bay, someplace in there.

Yeah. That was quite the experience. But Rocky was, he never flew back to Edmonton or anything like that. Just north, Yellowknife and north was all his thing, but he knew it. And he was 75 or 76 years old. He didn't have a license anymore. But, yeah, because I remember when we went to Hudley, the guy that I went to work for, said that he doesn't have his pilot's license, but he said it doesn't matter. He said he's a hell of a good pilot. Well, okay, doesn't matter to me if you got a license or not. And he was, he was a very, very good pilot. Yeah. I can recall asking him if he had ever had any, you know, bad incidents. And he said, yes, he put it down a few times, but nothing that he couldn't walk away from. But he said always had control of it. The north is, have you ever been in the north?

**Heather** I haven't.

**Jerry** It's such an interesting place. You know, I always thought I wouldn't mind living up there, but I'm glad I'm not because of the cold. I could recall, do you remember that guy that ate the nurse, Hartwell?

**Heather** Oh, yeah.

**Jerry** Harvey Hartwell. Anyhow, he's from Fort Norman, just out of Norman Wells. I was in Norman Wells hauling fuel out of there and Lee at the Esso Bulk, where we were

hauling, loading our fuel out of the refinery. He asked me one day, when I come in there, he says, have you ever met "Harvey Eatwell"? And I said, no. So, we shook hands and okay I know Harvey Eatwell. We got caught, maybe a couple of weeks later. Well, actually, I saw him one other day at the hotel restaurant in Norman Wells, and the restaurant was just about full and he was sitting all by himself. Well, I had met the man, so I thought, well, I kind of know him, so I went over and I said, do you mind if I sit here? No, sit down. You know, we talked about everything.

So maybe a week later we got stuck in a real bad snowstorm in Fort Norman and we had to stay over because they blocked a road right off. You couldn't go anyplace. So I said, well I know Harvey Eatwell here, you know, here in Port Norman. And he told me if I ever had to come, to stay. Then the guy at the motel, because it was only a three- or four-room motel, he started to laugh. He said, well, that's the guy that ate the nurse, because he was stuck in the Arctic for how many weeks or something. And I said, well, I'm not going to stay in his place.

Anyhow, when we were there, because he flew a plane and he'd go to all the little Indian places and pick up people and bring them, like Fort Norman had a hospital that was run by the nuns, you know. So he'd bring pregnant women in or whatever and they were sick, and he put the plane down right there because I remember when we were there, they said that he's crashed a plane again. But they found him right away and it was not too far out of the thing. But he was a big man. Very nice man, very soft-spoken man, but big. So it was one of my experiences being up in the north. But, yeah, the north is definitely something.

**Heather** So when did you stop, like driving truck and that?

**Jerry** Well, you know what, I still have my number one license. Even though I'm 80 years old, I still have my number one license. I don't have any trucks left or anything like that, as I've been retired. But I think it was when I had my heart attack, six years ago, that's when I kind of had to quit. I had two heart attacks, one after another, and then my brother passed away and he was the youngest one. He was only, also 50-some years old, and he was a partner, my partner. So, then I decided to sell. I expanded the business.

At one time, I said to my brother, you stay here in Grassland, and then I started another one in Red Deer, a fuel business. L&R Distributors and got it going. It was a good business. And then, when my brother started getting sick, well then I said, well, I'm going to go back to Grassland and I'm not staying in Red Deer. I sold that business, and then moved back here. He was already sick, he had brain cancer, so he didn't last very long after. Well, it was probably a year or two, but he couldn't do anything, you know. So then after that, then I had my heart attack just right after that. And I said, you know what? This is just not worth it. So I sold it all, the business, too.

And then when Alpac first moved into the area, you know, there was a lot of people that were against it. I was one of them that was maybe outspoken and tried to push to get

something in here. So when Alpac first moved in, I was in the fuel business. Well I went over, because I had fought hard and that was when Ralph Klein was king and I sat on the board with Ralph Klein. I was the president of our association from Athabasca region.

**Heather** The constituency association?

**Jerry** The constituency. I was a president of ours from Athabasca for, I think, eight or ten years. And then I was something for Fort McMurray Airport, where you had a whole thing combined after. But, anyhow, like I said, I fought hard for it. Then when they started building the mill, I thought, well, I got a chance, maybe we can haul fuel to. Well, they give it all to Esso, so I didn't get anything. So anyhow, I thought, well, you know what, it doesn't really matter that much.

Then I said, you know what, I'm going to build a service station here as close as I can to the pulp mill. So I went to the farmer that they bought all the land around there except this one farmer, that was just right on the correction line there, right on the road allowance or just off. So I asked him if he would sell that quarter of land that was along the Alpac road, and he said yeah, but he said I want the same amount of money that Alpac is paying their guys, all the ones that run. And I said, yeah, you know what, I don't blame you. So I said, yeah, I'll pay you exactly what Alpac pays per acre. But I had just all muskeg land, but it didn't really matter. Then I built the service station and that's actually when my wife had passed away. And so that kept me going. You know what it was? It was bad because a lot of guys were coming around I noticed. I always had liquor around, you know, and there was guys coming around to my house even in Boyle, when I lived in Boyle. But these aren't my friends, but they're drinking my booze. And I said, this has got to quit.

So there was a guy that had some construction equipment and I let him park his equipment in my yard by Prosvita. I just said, hey, for rent, can I use your grader or whatever? And I had some of my own equipment anyhow, you know, loader and different things. And he said, yeah, just use whatever you want. So I did the yard and I'd go every day when I'd finish work in Grassland, I'd go to Prosvita and I'd work till 11:00, 12:00 at night. I'd come home and there'd be nobody around. And that's how I got all the yard work done. Then I got the guy to come in and start building it, and that's how we built Prosvita. But that kept me going. That was the best thing I ever made. Otherwise, maybe a guy would have hit the bottle or something. This way, you know, you were busy. I was kept busy and I remember guys coming down and saying, why are you doing that? Well, because I like it. And I did. I enjoyed it and it was something different. So we built Prosvita up and put a restaurant into there. It turned out to be a heck of a good business.

**Heather** Okay, I've driven by it. I didn't know that was you.

**Jerry** Yeah, yeah, I built it. If you look, there's a sign out there saying Derkos 60 years in business, or something like 65 years. There's a sign right out on the road. Yeah, I built it and then Rod bought it after.

So I had a good life, you know. Traveled while I was single, I guess, you could say. Husky Oil used to have trips to different areas, you know, Hong Kong, Malaysia, different parts of the world every year or every 18 months. And we were always quite successful. So I'd win a trip or they'd pay half the trip or something like that. So I did travel a lot around the world, even though I can't say I was myself because I always had so many friends. So I was not myself. I always had friends. But my wife, she went on a few, when she was still here. We went, I remember her coming to China with us and a couple other ones. But then when she got sick, well she couldn't do it.

You know, our fuel business, we got to be known quite well, because I hauled fuel as far as Fort Vermilion. I serviced people in Fort Vermilion, High Level, any place, if somebody would say something about something going on, I'd get ahold of somebody, or a lot of times never made no money at it, but it just was always a challenge. So we got to be, in fact, it was quite interesting when Rod here bought Black Tiger out, like in Slave Lake.

So one day Rod says to me, here just a couple three months ago. Well, Colin asked me if I would haul a skidoo to Slave Lake for him. Rod said, hey stop at the bulk plant, I'm just in the process of dealing with, buying them all out, he said. Go in there and see what the guys think of somebody taking it over. So I did stop there and I acted like I just heard through the grapevine that you guys are going to be getting a new owner. And you know, what do you think of him? And he's from Grassland. Rod said just feel them out, you know. So I kind of went in there, and anyhow, after talking to them for about 10 minutes or 15, the guy says to me, well, why are you asking, are you associated with him or what? When I said no, I used to own that thing. Oh, he said, you're the guy that was our thorn in our side all the time. I used to go to Wabasca and haul to a lot of rigs, different things. I said, no, you guys are a thorn in my side. If you weren't around, I would have had more business. After all these years, I thought that was pretty good. At least I did disturb a few people, but we did do a lot of haul, like into Fort Chip and stuff like that.

**Heather** So, what do you do now?

**Jerry** I just help Colin. I go to Grassland, not every day, but I probably go four or five times a week from Boyle. I go meet the guys at 8:00 in the morning for coffee. There is a coffee group that sit about eight of us together and meet with the boys, and go over old times or different things. I was there this morning and I leave home and I got to drive 20 miles to go there and back. Price of gas, I don't know if it's a good idea, but it's, you know, it just...

**Heather** Fills your day up.

**Jerry** Yeah. Then I stop to see Colin at the thing, and then he gets me to pull trailers, but just small trailers. Not the big high ones or anything like that. Mostly just flat decks or that, you know, like he gets them out of Red Deer or different, Edmonton or Stony Plain, different places like that. I don't really do a hell of a lot.

**Heather** Just enough to keep busy.

**Jerry** Yeah, You know what, I can't because I hurt so bad as soon as I got a pacemaker and defibrillator. They put a third wire to the bottom of my heart, and when the last time I went in, not that long ago, they said that your pacemaker is working 98% of the time. So I'm relying pretty well on my pacemaker and so I can't do anything.

I still enjoy driving. I like to drive around, but I don't drive stateside anymore. Well, I might, maybe I might this fall. I might drive down to the States, but, you know, over Covid when you couldn't go anyplace. But I don't want to fly. Definitely flying is out for me. The last time I flew, it just hurt the whole time I was there.

**Heather** Pressure probably.

**Jerry** Yeah. So I thought, you know what, it's just not worth it, to heck. So, if anything, I'll just drive. You know what, I'm happy. I led a perfect life, you know, an interesting life. I've done a lot of things. I can't really say anything that I would have done very much different.

I got involved in the community a lot and did a lot of community work, and always supported the community 100%. I was a fireman for, the fire chief for... Well, Johnny Pysyk and myself started the fire department. We went to Eddie Semenchuk, which was a farmer there, and I think his wife taught school. She was an Elgert from Athabasca. Anyhow, he had an old shop and he said, well, if you guys want to move it and you can use it for your fire hall. We moved it about a mile down the road and moved into Grassland, and Johnny Pysyk, so we would take turns being fire chief. We'd say, Johnny, it's your turn to be fire chief this year. Next was my turn. So we were fire chiefs for years, and then my brother kind of took over.

We bought our own fire truck, we bought everything, we never relied on the County at all. We'd go to casinos and we got to be really good friends with the lady who was kind of in charge of the casinos in McMurray, and sometimes she'd let us go three or four times a year. But you know what we did, when we go down there, bring our group, well we'd go to the store and buy boxes of chocolates and different things like that, you know, just to butter them up. They all like that. So naturally, if a group couldn't make it, she'd phone us right away and say can you guys go? Of course we can make it. We used to get, you know, there was times we'd get up to \$60,000 for couple of days work. So that's why we were able to buy all these \$400,000, \$500,000 pieces.

**Heather** That first building. Is that where the fire hall is now?

**Jerry** Yeah, but it was just over in the corner. But the County built the fire hall. We didn't have to build a fire hall. The County built the fire hall, but all the equipment till right at the end here, I think the County paid for one truck or something. The rescue vans and everything was all paid for just by our group of people. Johnny Pysyk was really, really good in that end of it. We were the envy of all the fire departments. But, like I said, we made it all on our own money, and we had an in, so it was okay.

**Heather** I remember when I talked to you, you had told me about going to Plamondon, I think it was.

**Jerry** Johnny Pysyk, with that old fire truck. Oh, yeah, he'd come right to the fire. The school was on fire.

**Heather** And the brakes weren't working?

**Jerry** No. Well, that was, it was a 1949 Ford, that thing, you know. Then it was, well, it was an old, old truck and the brakes just got hot, and then he had no brakes coming down that hill. He had a runaway. They said, well you're definitely the closest guys in a fire. You know, that was quite hilarious then, because the fire guys said what the hell's this stupid guy doing, coming right in?

Yeah, you know, Grassland community is a good community. It still is a good little community, you know.

**Heather** It's grown.

**Jerry** You know, at one time it was bigger than what it is now, but there was lots of little businesses. We had a couple of hardware stores, but they have all shut down. But it's a different style of business now.

**Heather** There's a beautiful hall there, though.

**Jerry** There was a big wedding this last weekend. Beautiful wedding.

**Heather** Well, there had to have been, what, 350, 400 there for that Ukrainian supper. It was packed.

**Jerry** Yeah. And this wedding that they just had last weekend, a Kilar wedding, there was probably 300 or better, but they put on a real classy, classy wedding. You know, they had an open bar and they had a live band, and the band was from Kikino. You know, aboriginals or Indians, and they were drinking beer and they were playing at 2:30 at night. I guess, Mark Kilar said, hey, you guys, it's time to maybe shut it down, we're going to run out of booze. The bar was still open. Mark, he was telling me, when he was talking to them, he said they said, hey, we'll play till four in the morning. You keep bringing us booze, we'll keep playing.



Yeah, it was a nice deal. Very nice. It felt good for them. I think I went home about midnight, but everybody was having fun, you know. It was good to see people having fun like that. Well, were you there for that Ukrainian deal?

**Heather** Yeah.

**Jerry** They had Kryvenchuk play. Yeah. It was good to have him, too. And, you know, the guys were dancing. Well, you know, this wedding that they had, they were called the Three Sisters. They're from Mallaig and they come to do the catering. And I'll bet you the youngest of the three girls is probably 80.

**Heather** Oh, really? Oh, wow.

**Jerry** One was walking with a thing like that [walker] and still cooking. I know Mark said that well, I went to the church service and I saw Mark before the church started. The church service was in Athabasca, here. He said I was in Grassland at 7:30 this morning, he said, and the women were already there starting to cook, and they're from Mallaig. Yeah, and they went home that night. In fact, I helped them load some of the stuff in the back of their pickup, and I thought, you poor old gals, why are you doing this? You know what, you're too old for this. And in fact, they said that this was a little bit too hard, too far away, you know. By the time they drove back home again, and they had one Filipino girl helping, but she didn't know how to drive, so one of the older ladies had to drive and she was so tired. You know, they even said they didn't realize just how much work it was going to be and everything and said they wouldn't do it again.

**Heather** Where does Colin get his... every time I see him, he's in a colorful shirt.

**Jerry** Well, you know what, he buys. And like, I personally, that's a stupid habit of ours. I personally had over 200 shirts.

**Heather** Really?

**Jerry** I gave over a hundred away, not too long ago.

**Heather** Like shirts like him, those Hawaiian shirts.

**Jerry** Not quite, no. He's got some outfit that he buys them from. He's forever coming on Amazon or one of them things. There's always a parcel. I just took his cleaning to the cleaners because they were in Vegas or Laughlin here, and I took his shirts to the cleaners and there were 11 of them. They were different colored shirts. Even the lady at the cleaners there, she said, oh, this guy's got very colorful shirts. I says, yeah, I don't know where. All of a sudden he started doing that. Probably about a year or two ago. He started little by little, and now he's right into that. But some of these, that I did take to the cleaners, I even said to the lady said, wow, these are a little bit different. And she says, yeah, they are all different.

**Heather** He cracks me up.

**Jerry** Yeah. Oh, he can talk.

**Heather** Yeah, very nice, though. He's very helpful. He's always been, whenever I've had a question, he's made sure I get it answered.

**Jerry** Oh I think it's all like that. Well, I know he's definitely helped me, because you know, after my wife passed away, he just took it on himself. He worked, like we were very busy then, and he went into one of the fuel trucks and he pretty well lived in it. I hardly ever saw him at home. He was just driving and going steady, steady. Yeah. You know, both of my boys were very, very close with their mom. We had a good time. Well, you know, I knew the families really well. You know, the Radmanovich family, which was a very, very good family. Yeah, they were just excellent, excellent people, you know. Too young. That should never, ever happen.

[End of Interview]

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