

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
Transcription of Ken Stafford audio recording_2018
http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/k_stafford.php

Narrator: Ken Stafford
Interviewer: Brenda Gilboe
September 11, 2018

[Start of Interview]

Brenda This is July 7th, and I'm interviewing Kenneth Richard Stafford, and I'm Brenda Gilboe, the volunteer.

Ken I'm Ken Stafford, and I'm giving you the history of my family from as far back as I can go. My great granddad, John Stafford, and his wife, Elizabeth, my great grandparents, moved from the U.S. to Barrie, Ontario, somewhere in the early eighteen hundreds.

My granddad, Frank, was born to John and Elizabeth Stafford in 1860 in Barrie, Ontario, where Frank grew up. Later he met Margaret McQueen who had immigrated to Canada from Scotland with her parents.

Frank and Margaret were married in 1887 and farmed in Parry Sound, Ontario, until 1894. During this time, they had four children. At the end of 1894, they decided to move out west with the four kids. They joined the Parry Sound Colony, a group of people from Ontario, and together headed west. They ended up at Bruderheim, where Frank homesteaded. This was still part of the Northwest Territories. Two more children were born—Grace in 1897, and my dad [Howard] was finally born in 1899.

In 1903, he [Frank] sold the homestead and moved to a farm near Lamont. Then he built a livery stable in Lamont in contract for the mail run from Lamont to Saddle Lake.

In 1911, Frank obtained two South African Scrip, which were the same as homestead rights. So Frank filed on this E1/2-5-67-23-W4 north of Athabasca, just northeast of where Baptiste Creek meets the Athabasca River.

Frank's family came to Athabasca on the first working train that came to town. That was when the railroad opened; when it first came into service. Frank and Margaret built a house on the boundaries between the NE- and the SE-5-67-23-W4, as in those days, the homestead required you to live at least six months a year on your own property. So you live six months on one side of the house and six months in the other side of the house. They then bought a fraction of land between their homestead and the Athabasca River, which is NW-4-67-23-W4. At that time, the steamboats were still traveling the river in the summer, and in the winter the freighters used the river to haul freight into the north part of Alberta. The road from Athabasca to the west country to Baptiste Lake crossed the creek by the river, [they] had a ford, [as there were] no bridges, but they crossed a creek there.

So Frank then built a stopping place between what's called the ford and the river. We put up a barn and lodging area for the freighters and to feed the horses and people could stay—probably slept in the loft of the barn. Then the stopping place was closed when the highway was built west of Athabasca, and I'm not quite sure what date that was.

Frank was a farmer and he started raising cattle and sheep mainly, and that was because the land he homesteaded was mainly gravel and was not good for grain farming. And in 1914, Grossmont Municipality #668 was formed. Frank Stafford was the first Reeve and remained a councillor for many years on that municipal board.

Frank was also the founder member of the Athabasca Agricultural Society Ltd. in 1914 and was on the Board of Directors until it disbanded in 1920.

Margaret Stafford, his wife, died in 1920. Frank carried on farming with the aid of his family until 1927 and then he rented out the farm. He sold it to Howard Stafford, my dad, in 1936. Frank died in 1941 at the age of 81. Howard Stafford was the youngest boy of Frank and Margaret Stafford.

Frank and Margaret came to Athabasca in 1912 when they homesteaded, and Howard had very little education as the nearest school was 10 miles from where they were homesteading. So Howard did not go to school again; he had to self-learn on his own. In 1917, Howard got his first homestead on the SW-17-67-23-W4 which was approximately 2 miles north of his dad's homestead.

Howard went to Wetaskiwin to work for his brother-in-law, who was farming down there. He stayed there for a year and a half or so and, in 1925 he returned home, rented another one of his brother-in-law's land on the NW-8-67-23-W4 which he bought later. There was a house on it, so that's where he moved in and lived.

In 1931, Howard Stafford met Kathleen Mann who was born in Lamont in 1910, and she moved to Athabasca with her parents in 1925.

Kathleen finished her high school in Athabasca and went to Camrose Normal School and became a teacher. She taught her first class. Her school was at Lahaieville. The next year, she went up north to LaGlace and, in her third year, she taught at Parkhurst School which is east of Athabasca. While she was teaching there, she married my dad, Howard Stafford.

Kathleen quit teaching and started a family and helped with the farming. In 1931 Gordon Stafford was born, in 1936 Doreen Stafford was born, and in 1938 I was born. In 1936 Howard bought out his dad, who was a mixed farmer, raising cattle, hogs, and grain. In 1943 a severe storm came through and it wiped out our crop 100%, so my mother went back teaching school and taking us kids with her. She went to Larvert School which was approximately five miles away and stayed at the teacherage beside the school. My brother Gordon and sister Doreen had been taking correspondence up to this time. My mother was a tough teacher in my opinion, as she failed me in grade one, the year I started. I guess I slept too much in school.

In 1944 she came back to help with the farm as us kids went to Baptiste Lake School which was four miles the other way. We had an old truck by this time and my dad would take us to school. Sometimes we had to go by horses and sometimes we had to walk.

The following year, we were bussed to Athabasca as Baptiste Lake School closed down. The first school bus was a truck with a grain box. There was no top, just wooden benches along the side of the box. Later in the fall, they did put a roof on top of the box and hauled us to school. We still had to go three miles to catch the bus on the highway.

In 1949 the folks built a new house on the SE-5-67-23-W4. We were raised on that homestead and it was only two miles to go to catch a bus. So then we had to walk all the time—got no more rides. In the same year, 1949, a gravel pit was opened on the NE-5-67-23-W4, one of the original homesteads. Gravel was taken out and used by the county and the government for paving and gravelling roads.

In 1953 my brother Gordon graduated from Athabasca, went to Vermillion Agricultural College and graduated in 1955. Shortly after returning and working for a local farmer, he died in a drowning accident in Island Lake. Doreen graduated from Athabasca and went in for teaching. She taught in Athabasca and Boyle. She married Reverend John Conlin, who later became Anglican Bishop of Brandon, Manitoba. He passed away in 1988 and Doreen still lives in Brandon.

In 1957 I graduated from Athabasca, Edwin Parr Composite High School. That fall, I attended the Vermillion School of Agriculture, spent two years and graduated in 1959 and then I returned to the farm. My family in the meantime, in the 50's, had built up a small dairy herd and we milked cows. In 1959 we built a milking parlor which was easier for my dad while I was at college and doing things as the milking was then done by machine.

In 1959 I met Thelma Maertz of Rochester. She was a nursing aide at the Athabasca Hospital. We then got married on July 8, 1961, and we did take a honeymoon as I had a Volkswagen Beetle. Travelled to B.C., down through Washington, into Montana, then back up through southern Alberta having put on 2,200 miles. My fuel bill cost me \$22 which also included an oil change. The cost of travel was less than a cent a mile and oil was 35¢ a quart.

After returning home, we lived in Athabasca and Thelma kept on working at the hospital and I drove up to the farm and farmed with my dad. Thelma's dad, Fred Maertz, gave us two heifers when we got married as a wedding gift, I guess. We kept them for awhile but they did not fit into our dairy herd at the farm, so we ended up selling them. I did like cattle so built a corral and bought seven head of steer calves. We put them on grass for the summer and then fattened them for the winter, selling them the following spring and got 22¢ a pound, which I thought was doing pretty good.

In the meantime, the dairy herd was sold out and the facilities were turned into a feedlot, and the lot grew slowly. The first year we had the seven head. Next year I had 17 head. The following year had 37 head, and the year after that 75 head. By

1979 we were up to about 1,500 head. By this time, the yard was getting too small and it was too sheltered so it would not dry.

In 1966, March 5th our first child, Christopher James, arrived. Then Darcy Lee [was] born July the 28th, 1968. Both kids went to Athabasca. Chris graduated in '84 and Darcy in '86. Both boys stayed on the farm.

Then in 1968, Thelma and I purchased a house in Edmonton and had it moved out to the farm near Athabasca and put it on the SE-5-67-23-W4 beside my folks. The house was a little bit too big for the road coming in, so when they got to the wooden bridge by the Hutterites, they could not get across. They ended up cutting the sides off the bridge and taking the house across and then nailed the boards back up on the side of the bridge. I'm sure you wouldn't get away with that today. We purchased my dad's farm consisting of four quarters in 1969.

My folks stayed on the land and retired on the farm. My dad died in 1981 and my mother in 1986. In 1977 I also purchased a share in the Athabasca Feed and Seed Mill. I was buying a lot of my feed for the feedlot through the feed mill, and so came to the conclusion that maybe I should buy a share in the feed mill. Later, the feed mill got into financial trouble. As a result, I bought the operation out and my partners and I ran the mill until 1980. When I sold it, later that year, it burned down. So then we hauled our feed from Westlock—Champion Feeds, which had just started up a year before—making a trip a day, five days a week, using a truck and trailer, hauling approximately 20 tons a load.

In 1967 I bought the farm off Phil Labaschuk, which was two quarters just west of my land. And in 1968, I purchased the farm of Melvin Woodcox, which was just north of that—all land was adjoining. There's two more quarters.

In 1972 I hired a group of men working in the bush, cutting wood [and] sawing logs for a mill. I asked them to cut me fence rails out of swamp spruce as I was building my corrals out of rails. When I went to pick up the rails, they were big enough for fence posts. Now, what am I going to do? After thinking about it for a couple of days, I decided maybe I should build a post peeler and make fence posts. I knew a fellow by the name of Joe Boisvert who was very handy at building things. So I approached him and he agreed to it. It took him about two years. I helped him quite a bit and with the two of us and a lot of planning, we got it built and in 1975 it was complete and named the Roller Bark, which some may have seen pictures of. We started peeling posts in the winter of 1975. We didn't build too many that year. The following year we got in full production and peeled approximately thirty thousand posts during the winter, also poles up to 30 feet long, used for power poles, poles for barns, hay sheds, etc. I built posts up to about 1982 then it was sold as I was too busy with feedlot.

In 1974 I purchased the Bizek farm, five quarters, from Margaret and David Bizek. This land was also adjoining most of our land. Actually, it was right next door.

In 1979 we made this big decision and decided to build a large feedlot away from where we lived. As I mentioned before, what we had was getting too small in our yard, and too small shelters will never dry out. So NW-567-23-W4, a mile north of us,

[had] a very excellent slope, sloping to the east side of the quarter, which made it ideal for a feedlot. With the help of Gary Berger, the D.A., District Agriculturist, drew up plans and applied for permits, as we needed a permit for pumping water out of the Athabasca River, which we used for the feedlot. We got a permit for that, and we applied for a permit to build the lot and got a permit for 6,500 head. We had to pump approximately two million gallons of water a year out of the Athabasca River.

Work on the new feedlot started in 1979. We dug a dugout approximately 200 by 400 feet and 14 feet deep which was built on the ridge above the feedlot. Now, several people laughed at me for doing this and “how am I going to fill those dugouts?” I never told them I was going to pump the water into it. But anyway, the dugout was only dug down by seven feet into the ground and raised up about seven feet. Made a very high basin [from which] we could gravity feed all the cattle pens without use of any pumps and keep the water from running on the feed lot into the water source. In 1980 my father-in-law, Fred Maertz, agreed to supervise and help build the feedlot.

Work started on the 1st of April 1980. Bobby Gray was hired to dig the water lines, which measured over 2,000 feet. All trenches were left wide open until the pipe was laid in the ground; five and a half miles of pipe. We started with thirty-six lines in the first trench and one line for each pen, until we got to the end of feedlot. We left all the trenches open and did not have a single cave-in or a single accident, which you would not be allowed to do today. Most of the work was done by local employees. It took approximately two years to complete the first stage. In the first year we still fed cattle at home on the old lot and in the second year moved the cattle to the new lot, feeding up to 3,000 head.

The farming operation changed quite a bit as we went from haying in the summer to making silage. The reason for this was we could not put up enough hay to feed that amount of cattle and the weather was always against us where silage—showers and that—did not hurt us. We could keep going. As you need more feed, we bought a lot of standing crops around the country from local farmers and as far away as Camrose. We also used cereal crops, clover crops, hay crops, whichever was available, and some grain crops that were not suitable for grain. We took them too, being full of wheat, etc. As time went on, we rented more land, also bought some more, and at the peak we were farming about 36 quarters. We needed about 15 to 16 thousand tons of silage a day and most of that was grown on our own land.

All our grain was purchased mainly from local farmers, but some came from as far away as the Peace River country. We needed a large supply of grain. To get ample supply, we started putting up what we call high moisture grain. We would buy grain that was high in moisture from the farmers in the fall, before it was dry, and roll it and put in large bags to store where it would keep without spoiling for a long time. One fall we purchased up to 200,000 bushels and bagged it all. We rolled it too before we bagged it, so we were rolling 24 hours a day for weeks on end.

In 1982, by that time, the feedlot was known as Stafford Feeders Limited. We purchased a truck liner that year and hauled cattle for several years and the truck was driven by Chris Stafford. He drove for five years and came back to the feedlot and we hired a driver. Upon Chris's return, we added to the feedlot, putting on another row of pens, bringing the capacity up to 6,000 head.

We custom fed a lot of cattle—at times anywhere from 40 to 60 percent. We had customers that would feed as many as 50 head, had customers that would feed thousands of head. We had customers from all across Canada and the United States. We fed cattle and calves from 300 to 400 pounds, lots of times up to 700 to 800 pounds, [then] move them out to other feedlots where they would fatten them. Sometimes those cattle would go out to grass here and stay in the area, and then be sent south to the finishing lots in the fall. We also finished some of our own cattle and carried them from calves right through to the finishing up to 1200, 1400, 1600, 1700 hundred pounds, whatever required. One year we turned over ten thousand head, mostly scattered. They would go through the squeeze at least three times. And that's where the wife came in, she was a nursemaid on the health department of the cattle and looked after it as I got too busy, and she was not working. She had a crew of girls and ran all these cattle through the squeeze. So they were good at giving needles.

Later that year, we started a cowherd and ran over 600 cows and calves taking more land, so more land was granted for pasture. After Chris returned, our shop was upgraded and we started building a lot of our own equipment. We hired a machinist, Ken Ells, who worked for us for many years and we also always had a mechanic. Building machinery was always on my mind. In the early years after the square balers came out, I decided I didn't like the stokers they were using behind the square balers that would tip and let the stooks slide off because sometimes these stooks would fall over. So I built a stoker instead. I would just trip and lay the bales down flat and left the bales sitting on the ground perfect. I built a couple of these and a welding company came to me and wanted to know if they could build them. I told them go ahead because I had not patented it. G & G Welding took over and built some, as far as I know, approximately 40 of these stokers. We built the post peeler after that, which I already mentioned, built by Joe Boisvert. Then the new lot was built, I built a new hydraulic squeeze, which is still operating today after 30 years.

That was the end of my building as Chris picked up the idea and started building equipment himself. These included three manure spreaders, 42-foot land roller, 10-foot grain bag for bagging grain in those big bags, and a Roto-Mix feed truck, which we used to feed cattle. These trucks are worth approximately \$170,000 just for the box and we built it for about \$50,000, so that was a big saving. Also he built several large roller mills for rolling grain which are very expensive to buy. I think he built ten of them. Straw shredders for breaking down the round bales and bedding cattle. There were many other things, like metal benders, metal rollers, blades for pushing silage that were about 16 foot wide. There were many other pieces of equipment and things.

We got back into building the feedlot, and it was not all roses in the days of the feedlot business as we built it in 1980. As you know, the interest rates from that time went up to 24 percent in 1982 to 83. It was almost to the situation where we almost lost the feedlot due to high interest rates but with a little negotiation with the bank over the year, I kept the bank from shutting me down and that helped me out for another year and we got back into operation. Fortunately enough, I turned the feedlot around within one year and got support back from the bank. We did have to get help from a consultant, according to the bank, to help us with the feeding industry, and

the consultant I got worked with me for a year on feeding cattle and the operation of the feedlot. At the end of the year, the consultant wrote the bank a letter and told them I knew more about feeding cattle than what he did. So he didn't think he was necessary to be on the payroll. The bank agreed, so I got off of having to have a consultant and ran the feedlot on my own.

It went along pretty good then until when it was a very dry year and feed was very scarce. We were making silage and got about a ton per acre. Unfortunately, the rains came late and all the crops, especially the canola crops did not mature, and so we were able to make silage out of them—also some of the later grain crops. And so we ended up with enough silage to get us through the year. Then the following year, we got hit again by the mad cow disease. BSE they called it, and all the countries closed the borders to Canada which caused cattle prices to drop drastically. I was fortunate in those years because I had 2,800 head of fats ready to be sold that winter and when the BSE hit, I only had two head left in the feedlot. So I escaped a big downturn.

Earlier in the year, we had purchased a large number of calves for the next year, which were in the feedlot, so they had to go to grass for the summer as the prices did not recover from the BSE and the borders were not open for quite a while. These calves were out to grass and then came back into the feedlot to be finished as fats and sold the following spring. The price had not recovered so a lot of money was lost even after the cattle were fattened. In fact, I would say close to half a million dollars was lost revenue in the feedlot. Now, this was lost by many of my customers, including myself, but we did get some relief from the government as they paid out some differences to help us out.

After we got through that with the cattle, things started to turn around. The prices had dropped, but they were adjusted, so there was a small profit back in feeding cattle. So then we were buying smaller cattle and back in the business at a much lower price at the time. This went on okay for another four or five years and we got back on track. Then we get hit with the E. coli outbreak at Lakeside Packing Plant owned by Nilsson Brothers, in which time the borders were closed again. I had at that time, several hundred fats ready for shipping. In fact, we were just about ready to ship and the borders were closed. They were also contracted to the Nilsson Brothers but there was a clause in the contract stating that if the borders were closed, the contract was void. So then we could not ship these fat cattle and therefore we had to feed them for another three months. The feed costs at that time were high, running over \$3 a day per head. We ended up feeding them for 90 days or better on top of that, and then when we did get a chance to sell the cattle, we had to sell them at 16¢ a pound less than what they were contracted for. With the extra 90 days of feeding and reduction in price, the feedlot end up losing another half a million dollars. There was a little support, but very little recovery from the government, but we did have insurance on some of it.

After all the things we went through, things went good for the next few years. But then there were changes in the government regulations and taxes, the carbon tax, changes to unemployment compensation on the farm, minimum wage and all costs like wages, gas prices going up, machine prices, environmental regulations and employment. I decided I was getting to the age where I could not keep on going.

I decided that I was going to get out of it, and so I approached Chris, my partner in crime I guess we would say in those days, and told him I had had enough and he could either carry on or sell the farm, whatever he wished to do. Chris agreed to carry on and take over, so I told him I would work as a hired man. I think I worked harder than I did before! Chris tried to change the operation a little bit by doing more grain farming, buying large equipment, and feeding more cows and getting away from so many yearlings to get out of the labour situation. By this time, the wife had retired and [he] did not have her to run the back end. We then had a couple of bad years and couldn't get all the crop off so Chris said we should maybe sell the operation. He listed the real estate to be sold. After a year of listing, the Hutterite Colony decided that maybe they should buy it. So in 2017, they purchased all the grain land and in 2018, they took over the feedlot and the pasture.

On June 1, 2018, I officially retired after the sale, which we made at the end of the year. I was always interested in sports and even when I was in school, I was very interested in sports. I'm glad I was, as I played basketball in high school and in college, also won the Northeast Alberta Championship in College—in 1959 I guess it was—and with me on the first line. Then I started curling when I was still in high school in 1956. I still curl today twice a week. I played baseball for many years and fastball for almost 40 years. In 1958, playing in Athabasca with a team called the Aces in those days, we only played tournament ball. We played 37 games and won 35. We made over \$5,500 that year which is a pretty good wage for a bunch of farm boys.

Then I started golfing in 1969, golfed for two years, went to Westlock and ended up winning the 4th flight, shooting two over par. Jokingly, I told the people with me I should quit because I'll probably never do that again. I was just joking and not intending to do it, but did. I quit for 45 years when I got too busy and didn't go back golfing until 2015. Now I golf about five times a week. After retiring I decided to put my own golf simulator in my garage so I'll be golfing probably everyday year 'round now.

Some of the other highlights from my years were in 1985, I sold the first Canadian cattle by satellite to Superior Livestock of Texas. I did very good as a lot of buyers wanted to buy the first Canadian cattle I ever sold by television and drove the price up that day by quite a few cents, just to be the first ones to buy cattle that way.

In 1987 we received the Farm Family Award through Northlands. We were presented it at The Klondike Days in Edmonton. And in 1993, we shipped a large number of cattle, the biggest shipment out of the feedlot at one time, to Greeley, Colorado; ten liner loads, seven hundred head plus, all of which were hauled 1,350 miles to Greeley. There is a picture of all the liners lined up on the road next to the feedlot.

We did a lot of cattle testing doing drug testing for the companies. Tested for food additives in feed for the feed companies—health and injection costs of cattle through the different organizations. I gave several talks on feedlot operations, cattle health, feeding of cattle, processing of calves, marketing of cattle. I gave talks all the way across Alberta including Vermillion, Lethbridge, Edmonton, High Prairie, Grande Prairie, Fairview, Vermillion College. I found that quite enjoyable. I even got into

university and gave a talk at the university. The only time in my life I ever got to university "school", but I gave a talk on feedlots to the agriculture class a few years ago.

In 2012, we received our 50-year marriage certificate, 100 years of landowner certificate, and 50 years of farming, all at one time.

Brenda Thank you very much. That was a very interesting history.

Ken Thank you.

[End of Interview}

Machine transcribed by: trint.com
Edited by: Kirsti Giacobbo
Proof-read by: Linda Doroshenko

December, 2020