

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project Transcription of Larry Armfelt-001.mp3

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
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Narrator: Larry Armfelt
Interviewer: Brenda Gilboe
February 26, 2022

[Start of Interview]

Brenda This is February 26, 2022 and Larry Armfelt is going to record his life.

Larry Okay. This is the story of my life relating the experiences as I remember them in a somewhat chronological order, combined with a somewhat prioritized and categorized order. So we'll start with the early times. I'll spend a lot of time reflecting on the very early memories, that's prior to electricity or running water and natural gas. I hope this is interesting to the listeners and readers, and then I'll do a summary of my life from approximately 1960 forward.

I was the fifth of six children, one girl and five boys. I was born on November 28, 1944 to my parents Helen Martha (Lynk) and Hans Merdin Armfelt. My mother arrived from the United States via Montana. Medical records indicate she was born in Travers, Alberta on December 30th, 1913. Family legend indicates that she may have been born in Montana, and the first medical establishment she arrived at was in Travers. We're not sure - she was registered as Canadian. Dad was born and raised in Copenhagen, Denmark.

I was raised on a homestead in a very small log home, situated about two miles west of what is now the County Beach on Baptiste Lake. The homestead was also about a half mile west of Winding Trail School.

Our home was two log structures butted together. One was 12' by 12' on the existing property and the other one was 12' by 16'. Dad added the new 12' by 16' structure in 1938. It had no electricity, no water, and no central heating. This was not totally uncommon in 1944 in a rural, isolated setting. There were my parents and five siblings - Dick, Jack, Karen, Gerald and myself in this home.

The federal government brought Family Allowance into being in 1944 and the first cheque arrived in 1944. I was worth \$5 a month. At that time we were a family of five children. Because of the staggered amounts per child per month, we would have received about \$35 per month. Some portion of that money was spent on a highchair. Four siblings and me, five children and two adults living in this log home of 336 square feet and I was the first to have a highchair. With no electricity, no running water and no natural gas, parenthood had to have been a difficult experience.

In 1948 my grandfather, Harry Lynk, with help, added on a two-story addition with a bedroom area for the boys on the second floor. My uncle, Glenn Lynk and Aunt Shirley lived about a half mile south of us and raised two children, Dale and Darlene, on their homestead. My introduction to electronics was in their home. I would have been three or four years old, and saw a radio wired to an oval-shaped battery with another wire thread out through the window frame to the outside. It had wonderful music and voices emanating from this fancy box - a very vivid and specific memory for me.

Uncle Glen proved to be an important person in my life. I think I was 10 years old when I squashed my left foot in the hydraulic three-point hitch of our tractor. My brother Gerald brought me home from the field on the tractor with my foot dangling and bleeding. Mom sent Gerald to Uncle Glen's, who arrived quickly and took me to the hospital. It was quite a lengthy squash and gash. To this day the scar is still visible and the nails from my shoe have left a visible reminder alongside the scar.

I attended Winding Trail School from grades one through three, inclusive. We all walked to school. However, the daily chores done before and after school were extremely important, rigid and routine. "Wood-water-coal-ashes and coal oil" was my jingle of each day. Of course, we had other chores to do as well - cows, the occasional pig, chickens, and later two goats had to be cared for. Raymond, my younger sibling, was lactose intolerant and could not digest goat's milk. That's why I became the goat milker. Before long, I had the goats jump onto a bench so I could milk them in a much more comfortable position.

I got involved in milking cows when I was probably 10 years old or sooner. Spilling any milk was a completely avoidable circumstance. We had an adequate supply for family use, but when you consider consumption, cooking, separating for cream and making butter, it was a valued commodity. During the winter months, the trail to the barn was simply a set of human steps in the snow passable through usage. No actual walking path existed. I carried the milk from the barn to the house along this access. By late winter, the accumulation of snow was so high that the bottom of the pails were dragging on top of the snow beside my steps. Simply carrying the milk pail was no longer an easy task, as the pail had to be lifted high enough so it would not hit the snow and tip the pail, thus spilling the milk. It was quite a chore, since my biggest fear was knowing that I would be in trouble with mom if the pail did not arrive at the house with a normal amount of milk. Next for the milk was the separating machine - skim milk came out of one spout and cream out the other. Then we'd wash up, eat breakfast, dress for school, and catch the school bus for one more day of academics. We'd arrive home at about 4:45 pm, repeating the milking process before supper and homework.

A Life Lesson: As a four-year-old, my main job was to bring in wood for two stoves, one or two sticks at a time. Sometimes I would cheat and not pile the wood neatly in a wood box. Thus, it appeared to be fuller than it actually was. At about seven p.m., my mother would comment, "Gee, I must have been burning extra wood. We are not going to have enough wood until morning." Clothes on, dark stars, moon, and me rectifying a problem

that I had created. With subtle input, my mother taught me a valuable life lesson, do it right the first time.

Before I was strong enough to milk a cow by hand, on many occasions it was my job to go get the cows and bring them home for my older brothers to milk. We lived on a bush quarter with a minimal amount of hay field. My mother's instructions were simple but accurate. "Take the dog. He will find the cows and follow them home." All this was done without a cell phone.

Gardening and hunting were very important to our subsistence living. A large garden, all worked by hand, of course, and needing weeding, etc. during the summer. Besides the hoe, a smudge pot was an essential item. You started a small fire in an old pail, threw some green grass on top, and the resulting smoke kept away the mosquitoes, sandflies and horse flies.

A deer could be harvested any time in the early fall to springtime. That is when the season opened. No food was ever wasted.

From grades one to three, I attended Winding Trail School. Many times I took milk to school very carefully in a glass jar. During the warmer months, I would put my glass jar in the creek just before the school. At lunchtime, I'd run down to the creek and bring my cold milk for my lunch in the school, and then enjoy my sandwich and the elixir of life. School days during the winter months had to be adjusted somewhat for the climate. Daylight hours were short and many days were exceptionally cold. Of course, the school had no electricity, running water, or natural gas heating. I remember many mornings rearranging the desks to get closer to the pot belly stove.

When I started printing in grade one, I was left-handed. At that time, I was corrected and encouraged to use my right hand. My left handwriting would make the paper messy and smeared. Gradually, I became ambidextrous through many more normal functions in my life. For example, I shoot the puck with my right hand, but I bat left-handed.

I'm going to guess that in the late forties, we had a serious outbreak of rabies in the Athabasca area. Jack, Karen, Gerald and I walked from our home to Winding Trail School. Jack was provided with a stick about the size of a baseball bat. Strict instructions came from our parents. Mom told us, "You all stay together." Dad told Jack, "You protect anyone and everyone from any rabid coyotes." It worked, however, we did have one very serious issue in our yard. Dad was home at the time and dealt with the problem (a rabid coyote) using his 30-30 rifle.

Starting in the early '50s (I was about seven) each springtime was also a new adventure. Fish were spawning. This led to a new activity involving snare wire, pitchforks, .22 rifles and gunny sacks to carry the fish. For mom, it was canning time again. Many fish were cleaned and stored in a frozen locker as dad rented a small space in Shaw's grocery store in Athabasca.

Early spring also meant selling our squirrel, weasel, muskrat and the occasional beaver pelts we had accumulated over the winter months. It was an outdoor activity and learning process doing the skinning, stretching and drying, all to be sold to Hans Birkigt's store. The process was a lot of work, plus the stretchers and skins took up valuable space in the close quarters of our home.

An aspect of Christmas, which is a wonderful memory, was the parcel from Aunt Ella, Dad's sister in Denmark. I cannot recall all of the contents, but enclosed in a large box would be tin boxes containing sweets. Mom was a great cook for excellent, functional basic food. However, these tin boxes contained fancy cookies, small baked sweets and other treats, almost too extraordinary to eat. They were shared and eaten as a ritualistic blessing from the old country.

When our children, Mardell and Cory, were 10 to 12 years old, I sometimes told them boring stories from the past. I told them many times during the winter months we would crawl out of our feather tick comforters, and any water left in the washbasin would be frozen and there would be a crust of ice on the slop pail. They asked with a sense of bewilderment "Why?" Whenever I told our children these crazy stories, I always spoke about how we walked everywhere, I guess to the point of irritation to our kids. One time I was asked, "Didn't you do anything but walk " I replied, "Sometimes we ran" as the following example indicates.

About a quarter mile west of our home and north in the bush, there was an artesian well - a pipe pushed into the bank with water coming out - excellent running water. My dad would put a barrel on a stone boat, hitch up the horses, and at the age of four or five, I would cry to accompany my dad. Off we would go. It was great to go, but during the time he was filling the barrel, it was idle time and cold. On the way home dad would ask, "Are you cold?" I'd say "Yes" and he would say "Run behind!"

Coming of Age: I graduated from Edwin Parr School in 1962, knowing I had to start my own direction in life. About this time, Ole Armfelt, my cousin from Denmark, became a Canadian citizen. Ole's comments to my dad made him realize that mom deserved a better house. Soon, logs were cut and stacked. Sawing and planing for dimensional lumber was completed. I did the dry piling under the direction from the adults. By 1963, the beginning of the new house was underway. I worked that winter with the construction of the house.

However, my mind was telling me the University of Alberta was within my grasp if the desire was strong enough. My marks were fine. I just needed that last push. Don Corse provided me that last push. I started work with a survey part of the Alberta government. I was now on my way to fame and fortune. The job involved slashing, chain saws, shovels and knowing I was setting a new direction. In the fall of 1964, I enrolled in education at the University of Alberta, majoring in mathematics. I became student number 640793.

Between my first and second year of university (1965), I worked in Jasper National Park for the Department of Public Works. It was mostly manual labor. However, I think

because of my mathematical abilities, I also operated the level instrument on highway construction and on the water levels of the Athabasca and Maligne Rivers.

A coworker, Hector, was into scuba diving. His brother's suit fit me. What an opportunity! With no lessons or formal training, I was able to scuba dive in Pyramid Lake, Lake Edith, Patricia Lake, Lake Annette and Lac Beauvert. The local fish hatchery provided us with oxygen for our tanks for two dollars per tank. We would go to Lac Beauvert, which was next to the golf course, and retrieve errant golf balls, and sell them back to the golfers for 10 to 25 cents a ball. Off we would go to the fish hatchery and then the pristine lakes. My coworker Hector had been brief in his instructions - "Don't suck any water."

In the spring of 1966, I knew I was going to Inuvik after exams. I left Edmonton on a bright, sunny day, arrived in Inuvik, given a five-star sleeping bag and settled into a small shack with three others. I woke up the following morning, looked down towards my feet, and, at knee level, observed that a four- to five-inch-high snowdrift had accumulated through a crack in the wall. Once again, I had arrived.

The seasons of 1966 and '67, between university terms, I worked for Northern Transportation Company Limited. My job description was operating machinery to load and offload barges, aircraft, and other northern modes of transportation anywhere between Hay River and Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories (NWT). The hours were long and the experiences were educational and unique. The job provided me with enough revenue to continue my quest for a professional career.

1967 was Canada's centennial year. The federal government helped fund one of the biggest barges to go down the Mackenzie River, with a ferris wheel attached to the front deck of the barge. The people of Inuvik were lined up on the riverbank to board the barge and ride the ferris wheel. Daylight was 24 hours, so it was an extremely active few days.

In 1967, also between Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk in the large delta of the Mackenzie River. Tuktoyaktuk is at sea level. Inuvik is about 90 feet above sea level in a horizontal distance of approximately 150 miles south by river from Tuktoyaktuk. Where the Eskimo Lakes drainage meets the river, the lake waters were crystal clear and the delta water with silty brown. The line where the waters met was as identifiable as it was different.

I met Margaret Holmes at Lister Hall at U of A. I was on a date with another girl, but spent the whole time asking about Margaret, whom I had just met. 1966 was a turning point in my life.

During studies, I became a senior resident at Lister Hall during 1967-68. My official U of A transcript summarizes my marks and includes a line indicating my involvement in the university housing program. Looking back, maybe I should have spent more time on my studies. It was a great experience and the experience is credited on my transcript.

In Inuvik, the communication system was in development stages. On May 21st of 1967, I got permission to use the Northern Transportation Company Limited phone system to phone Margaret on her birthday. Her mother answered and told me that she was out on a date with another fellow. When Margaret got home and heard what was said to me, Margaret couldn't believe her mom said all that. "Out" was enough to say. But the rest is history as we were married on August 17th in 1968.

I started my teaching career at Edwin Parr Composite High School in May of 1968 and full time in September of 1968, with Bob MacGregor as principal. Margaret started her pharmacy career working in retail for Glenn Osment. My first year of full-time teaching was 1968-69. That year I taught math to grade 9s and math 30 and 31, all provincial departmental final exams. I was nominated for 'The First Year Teacher of the Year' award at the provincial level. I never won the award, but it was great to be recognized.

The next five years we spent testing our wings, exploring our new world, saving a bit of money, and growing together.

We have two children Mardell, born August 17th, 1973, and Cory, born February 13th, 1975.

I have always loved driving anywhere, anytime. Pre-children, Margaret and I would even drive to Jasper just to have coffee. During my time at U of A, I became a driving instructor with the Alberta Motor Association, an aside to my academic studies and fraternity activities.

In the 1969-1970 school year at Edwin Parr School, with the cooperation of the administration and the school board, a coworker and I introduced the first driver training program, both classroom and practical, for high school students. Students received two credits for this program and professional training in the car. The vehicles were supplied by the local General Motors and Ford dealerships. They did a slight retrofit, a hand-held kill switch, a brake pedal on the passenger side and an extra rearview mirror. This was a most successful program which later morphed into North Central Driving School, my private extra business, which I owned, drove and administered throughout the Edmonton, Leduc and Sherwood Park areas for a number of years. This supplied extra revenue during a number of years concurrent with my teaching career. This driver training went accident free, had many satisfied customers, and, with the consultation of other professional driving schools, only refused one applicant.

One challenge was a young foreign student who was about 20 years old. All he could say in English was "Thank you, sir." During one experience near Kingsway Avenue and 109 Street in Edmonton, a cab driver became upset with us. With windows rolled down, he was telling my student exactly what he should be doing in the most rude manner. My student was responding "Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir." repeatedly. We had to sit for a bit until I stopped laughing. Then we were able to continue the lesson. Margaret did the bookings, accounting, paid the taxes and kept me supplied with coffee.

During the summer months of my teaching career, I never stopped attending academic venues - University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, University of Michigan-Kalamazoo, and the University of Hawaii Chaminade Honolulu, thus adding five transcripts to my name, equivalent to over one more full university year. This gives me five plus years of total university education.

The highlights of my extended teaching career were the off-campus trips with students. While teaching in Thorsby, Margaret and I, along with Gerry and Barb Darichuk, chaperoned 36 students from Thorsby and Calmar through England, France, Belgium and Holland. A highlight of that overseas trip for Margaret and me was a visit to the Keukenhof tulip fields near Amsterdam. They fly the biggest Canadian flag I have ever seen. Margaret's father served in the military during World War II, a wonderful bit of Canadian war history.

In Athabasca there were multiple off campus science excursions to places such as Drumheller, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, coal fields in southern Alberta and Jasper, ski trips to Banff, Jasper, Edson, Silver Summit, and also orientation trips to the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and the University of Alberta. I organized them and often was the bus driver for these events. Also, I accompanied the Edwin Parr High School band to Los Angeles for a competition, the trip organized by Bill Jones.

It is now time to branch out to other facets of my life.

We purchased 115 acres as lake lot 24 adjacent to Baptiste Lake while I was principal of Thorsby Junior Senior High School in the county of Leduc. I had the opportunity to take a job as vice principal at Edwin Parr School in the fall of 1980 and moved to our country estate with a wife and two kids, but with no power, no heat, no water and no telephone. By winter, we had a mobile home, the amenities, and a telephone wire lying on the ground or hanging in the trees. Our phone was 'two shorts and one long ring' on the party line shared with three other residences. We had arrived in our permanent setting.

Later, we purchased two more quarters of land in Athabasca County. We leased 400 acres about a half hour away from home and purchased an extra 10 acres in the municipality of Lesser Slave River for our cattle and horses.

I retired from the public school system as principal of Edwin Parr Composite High School in the spring of 2000.

My interests were always expanding - more land, building our own house, and eventually owning a herd of cattle (about 65 head) and having purebred Morgan horses, these being born, raised, we trained, and sold at various stages of development. We had between 20 to 40 horses at any one time in order to cater to what the market demanded. Our business name 'Baptiste Lake Morgans' is still incorporated today. Through our membership and a contractual agreement between the American and Canadian Morgan Horse Associations, all registered Morgan horses with the prefix name 'Baptiste' came from our farm. We have prodigy in our Baptiste Lake Morgans in

Australia, Switzerland, Germany, England and all across Canada and the United States. We still maintain communication with many of our horse world patrons and friends.

After building our home, I had more spare time. The Athabasca Lions Club then became a major part of my volunteer work. For many years, Athabasca Lions Club organized a weekend of rodeo, chuckwagons, chariot races and, on the last day, a demolition derby. Jim Minns and I fried about 80 dozen eggs for the breakfast to start the event. David James gave me his loader for the weekend to maintain the grounds, and he never sent the bill to me or the Lions Club.

I am blessed to have reasonably good health, a wife of 53 years, two children (Mardell and Cory), and a daughter from another family (Tammy Klein). She joined our family as a teenager and became an integral part of our family. Mardell and Cory each have masters degrees in their chosen professions. Tammy is in the field of nursing and home care.

One thing Margaret had to adjust to during our married life was my sleep habits. Four to five hours of sleep were adequate, six hours was a long night, and eight meant I must be sick. I recall during my teaching career that for three consecutive years, I never missed a day of work. The next year, I missed one - I was sick on my birthday. The next two consecutive years had no missed days, and, after that, a day here or there.

If I can choose one highlight of my community life, it was the organizing and bringing to a successful conclusion the history book 'From Out of the Wilderness'. It was, from beginning to official launch, about six and a half years of my involvement and that of a multitude of volunteer contributors, a time well spent.

In 2007, I was elected the County Councilor in division eight in municipal politics and retired as Reeve of Athabasca County in the fall of 2021. The last two years of my political career were most challenging. Besides the normal politics of Athabasca County was the added disruption of COVID 19. With a major contribution of support from Margaret, I am pleased to have been able to serve the Athabasca County as the elected representative of division eight.

I feel very blessed to have been from Tuktoyaktuk to Cancun, and from Nova Scotia to Tofino, and multiple points between by air, land and water. I have primarily covered the North American continent.

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge the people involved with the United Church Memory Project in the Athabasca area, my wife, and Brenda Gilboe, who made this recording of a bit of history a possibility. Thank you and God bless.

[End of Interview]

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