

## Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

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### Transcription of Mary Olson recording 2017.mp3

Narrator: Mary Olson  
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Interviewer: Mark Boersma

[Start of Interview]

**Mark** Hi, my name is Mark Boersma. I'm interviewing Mary Barbara Olson and her maiden name is Buxton. Her father's name was George and her mother's name was Susan and her birthdate is April 28, 1933.

**Mary** Okay, I was born in the town of Bowden, Alberta, and I had two sisters, Elsie and Sheila, and one brother Ken. I was raised on a farm and I rode my horse three miles to school in Bowden. I attended Bowden school and Red Deer summer school before going to university in Calgary. During my high school years, I had summer jobs at the Red Deer Creamery and at the YWCA in Banff. I also wrote the Royal Conservatory Music Exams during those years. I graduated from the University of Alberta, Calgary branch, in 1951 with just a one-year degree, [laughing] it's not really a degree, and I started my teaching career in a one-room country school in South Athabasca, teaching Grades 2 to 8 the first year, and 1 to 8 the second year.

**Mary** I married a local farmer Carl Olson in 1952 and gave up teaching in June of 1953. The retirement didn't last long because from September of '55 until June of '60, I operated a private kindergarten for 23 to 27 students in the basement of the United Church in Athabasca. During this time, my two sons, Kelly and Ken, were born. When Kelly started school, I went back to teach Grade 2 in the old gym, now the site of the Performing Arts Centre. In 1966, I moved to the present Landing Trail School, to a room that eventually went over the hill due to the shifting landfill, where I taught a Grade 6 reading class and music, Grades 1 to 6. Team teaching was the thing in 1967. I was part of that. With a great deal of help from John, the high school music teacher, I incorporated many new ideas into the music program.

**Mary** That year. I was responsible for three student productions, one of which was the Canada Centennial Program for 1967. Team teaching continued for two more years, and I wrote and directed two major productions in which every student in Athabasca Elementary School (AES) had a chance to participate. In the summer of '57, I graduated from the Kodály music method. In 1968, I gave a workshop outside the county on my successful music program. In the fall of 1970, I left Athabasca Elementary for Edwin Parr Composite High School to teach Music 7, Language Arts 7, and the following year to teach language arts 8 and choral music 10, 20, and 30. The Now Generation, a Group of Singers in Motion originated from the music classes and these students

performed three major productions. I gradually moved up in the grades and taught language arts in 1972, and English 10 and 23 in 1973.

**Mary** Interspersed with the major subjects were also some junior high options, such as choral and dance, debate, and creative writing. One year I even taught a high school sociology class. From 1974 to 1981, I taught high school English with an occasional Grade 9 language arts added. During this period I inaugurated a special program for English 13 students where they worked with Grade 1 students two days per week. Two workshops on this method were given by me to other provincial schools. In 1981 I was given my first Grade 12 English class with the added challenge in 1984 of departmental examinations.

**Mary** I continued to teach at all levels of high school until my retirement in 1988, having stretched from kindergarten to Grade 12, and having taught a variety of subjects using very varied methods. I was exceedingly pleased to be able to teach drama, my first love, for the last two years of my career.

**Mary** I guess I didn't mention here that during this time I went back to university, of course, and took summer school courses, spring session courses, night courses, and got my degree in English.

**Mary** As well as other teaching duties, I was proofreader and advisor for the EPC yearbook for nine years and secretary of the Zone Two drama festival from 1980 to 1986. My students took part in drama festivals, I acted as an evening credit liaison officer for the University of Alberta for six years, oh here I put it, and during this time returned to complete my Bachelor of Education degree majoring in English. Other school-oriented activities I assisted with during the years were Red Cross teas, and home and school meetings in the '60s, on the executive and secretary for the ATA south local in the '70s and '80s, supervising school dances and curling, grad breakfast, retirement teas, social committees and award committees, Professional Development Committee of the ATA as President and Committee Member, School Rep on ATA local treasurer from 1979 to '81, and also marked departmental exams in Edmonton.

**Mary** After retiring from teaching, I took a year off to travel and then returned to teach private music lessons in voice, piano, and theory, preparing students for exams of the music festival. Several of my students went to provincials with three bringing back the top mark, many successfully completed the Royal Conservatory exams. I taught a total of approximately 3,000 students during my career. I now still teach my great-grandchildren theory, voice, and piano.

**Mary** Community work has been a part of my life. Music, English, and drama from the '40s to the 2010s including Music Festival participation and volunteer, taking students to exams in Edmonton, playing the organ for St Andrew's Anglican Church in Bowden, St Albans Church in South Athabasca, and All Saints Church in Athabasca. I was an accompanist for my dad, an organist at weddings and funerals, a part of choirs in the Bowden United Church and Athabasca United Church, member of the Varsity Drama

Club; writer, actor and director for the Athabasca Players, director of the Joyful Sound Choir and The Golden Memories Choir, which is still going on. Director of Country Music Productions and Chairperson for Country Music Scholarships. I was Director of the Handbell Choir and productions at the United Church, director of Australian Production at the Reformed Church, and gave several musical theater workshops. In the 1980s I received an award for my efforts of promoting live theater in Athabasca, and in the '90s was again recognized by the French theater group in Athabasca.

**Mary** I took part in Scottish dancing, square dancing, and ballroom dancing. I was a library board member and a book club member, and I played piano for the OORP [Order of the Royal Purple]. For the Town of Athabasca I worked with the cast of "The Athabasca Story" in choral speech in 1967. I sat on the board of the Alberta Heritage Committee and the town 75th anniversary committee. I compiled and wrote The Saga of the Whispering Hills for this event in 1986, and for the 150th anniversary of Confederation, 2017, I directed the Golden Memories Choir in the musical evening "From Sea to Shining Sea."

**Mary** I still am a member of the South Athabasca Entertainment Society, having several executive positions, and helped organize Christmas concerts and socials in the past. From my early years, I was a 4-H member in the Calf Club in those days, competing in cattle judging competitions and serving on the executive. When my children were in 4-H, I helped coach students in speech for their public speaking and judged public speaking contests. In my early years, I was active in barrel racing, and novelty horse racing. Except for this horse racing, I was never very active in sports, although I did bowl, play basketball, and take swimming lessons as a member of the Athabasca Curling Club. I was a member of South Athabasca St Albans Women's Auxiliary of the Anglican Church, and taught Sunday school and Bible study classes. I still am a member of a Bible study class in Athabasca. Through all these years, filled with activities, my husband and I raised a family to be proud of. In 2011, the family celebrated 100 years of farming, and my granddaughter and her husband, you might know him, I don't know, put on a play out at the farm, and we had a four-day event to celebrate that.

**Mary** The things I remember about Athabasca. In 1953, the bus depot burned, and my mother and sister had come up to see me on that very bus. And that night we heard that it burned--the whole depot burned, the bus and everything. That was interesting.

**Mary** In 1954 we got electricity on the farm, which was really a big thing because I lived in South Athabasca, which is not very far away now but at that time it seemed like a long way to town.

**Mary** In 1955 the big thing of that year was the opening of Edmonton's first mall at Westmount. And in 1959 I remember apricots were \$2.09 a case.

**Mark** Wow. That's a good deal.

**Mary** In 1958 of course John Diefenbaker, the largest majority government in the federal election, won.

**Mary** In '58, the TV shows of that time were Rifleman and Lassie, and we just got a TV, a black and white TV that you could hardly see any images on at all. I drove an old truck to town and the roads were, I mean, you think they're bad now, but there was no gravel or anything, and I drove this old truck that smoked to town to teach kindergarten in the United Church.

**Mary** I did lots of canning of vegetables and fruit and so on in those days.

**Mary** In 1960 the planetarium opened in Edmonton, which was something.

**Mary** Let's see, 1961, the world population was four billion, I've got written. This is my little book that I keep a little record of things that happen every year. In 1962, the first coin laundry in Athabasca burned, oh opened, I should say, and the Hopps' store at Meanook burned to the ground. It was a famous old landmark in Meanook. Mrs. Hopps taught my husband and taught my son in Grade 1. She taught my husband at South Athabasca, and she taught my son in town here, and their store burned down that year.

**Mary** Of course, the big thing in 1963 was John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Which is, you know, affected a lot of people here, people could remember where we were at the time that it happened.

**Mary** 1964, my son decided he was going to raise turkeys and I had to come home after school every night and pick turkeys and clean them for him. [laughing] Oh, dear.

**Mary** But we were a traveling family. We started early to take our children traveling. I remember we had a Volkswagen and we packed the Volkswagen up and had a tent on the front of it and went to my aunt in Jasper, and Banff, places like that. Even in 1966, the case of peaches, I only paid \$2.29 for.

**Mary** In 1966, the IRA blew up Nelson's Column in Ireland. That's what things people were talking about in Athabasca. On TV we watched The Ed Sullivan Show. That was the year I presented the Canada Pageant in 1967. 747 took its first flight on December 2nd, 1968. And in 1971, we went to England, Europe, and Ireland, stopped in Greenland, and my oldest son graduated from high school. I thought I had more about Athabasca in here, but maybe I don't.

**Mary** Oh, in 1975, do you know what happened? The beaver became the official emblem of Canada.

**Mark** Is that right? That's cool.

**Mary** And in 1976, I officially convocated with a Bachelor of Education degree, and the same year, my daughter-in-law got her Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood, so we graduated the same time.

**Mark** That's cool. That's interesting.

**Mary** In 1978, around town, no 1977, the Athabasca Inn opened, the West Wind trailer park opened, and the Athabasca Airport opened. These are all probably things that you already know.

**Mark** No, I haven't come across any of that with any of the people I've interviewed.

**Mary** And in 1978, John Richel was the Councilor for our division out there in South Athabasca.

**Mary** 1980 was the year I sat on the Heritage Committee, and I also acted in "Finian's Rainbow," I was the Jewish mama in "Come Blow Your Horn," and I was, is it Frankie or Johnny that did the shooting in "Riverboat Days"?

**Mary** Of course, at that time, Danny Hooper's stockyard was very important in Edmonton and people were going to it. And in 1981, the Devil's Lake Corral, people went to it. It didn't last many years, I think maybe about two years. But it was a big theater out in... by Devil's Lake.

**Mary** Oh, 1981, that was a big year for me because I was always active in the theater and that's the year the theater opened, and Landing Pool also. And from that time on, I was really involved with the Athabasca Players, and my husband left the farm and started working for Northern Reforestation.

**Mark** How did you meet your husband?

**Mary** I was teaching at South Athabasca, that's where he lived. And so we met there at a dance at South Athabasca. Well, actually, it was a dance at Atmore.

**Mary** Oh dear now we're getting into the '80s. New hospital and health unit opened on the east hill, and the new Legion and Saan Store, and the Edmonton Oilers won the Stanley Cup against the New York Islanders. We went to quite a few hockey games in those days.

**Mary** And we're still traveling. And during our lifetime, we traveled a lot all over Europe and Australia, New Zealand. A lot of places.

**Mary** 1985 was the year of the air disaster over Ireland, and I had to leave for England just right after that. I'll always remember that.

**Mary** Dr. Brown retired in 1987, and she had always been my doctor. She was with me with both my births and she was a wonderful doctor. And of course, in 1989, one of our best mayors ever Tony Schinking died. I had been with him on the Heritage Committee and certainly we had a wonderful town council at that time.

**Mary** 1992 Ralph Klein is the Premier, of course, and the pulp mill began operation in 1993. 50th avenue was widened to four lanes, and the second set of lights was installed by the hotel.

**Mark** That's interesting. Yeah.

**Mary** That was 1993.

**Mark/Mary** And now we still only have two sets of traffic lights. That's right.

**Mark/Mary** So many years later, eh. Yeah.

**Mary** 1994 the Duniece Center opened, including Neighbour's Pub, Subway, the video store, and the offices upstairs. WHPS opened, and AES, now called Landing Trail. And Clark's; at that time, Clark's operated a Rocky Top Riding Stables, of course, it's closed since then. And REA [Rural Electrification Association] was taken over by TransAlta. That was in '94.

**Mary** 1998, 14 medals for Canada were won in the Winter Olympics. And of course, in 1999, all the talk was of the Y2K disaster. That's all everybody talked about. Stores sold out of generators. It was just...

**Mark** The whole world was going to end, right?

**Mary** And we all sat there on New Year's Eve wondering what was going to happen, and of course nothing happened. And now 2000, the riverfront stage was built, which I was on the committee for building the riverfront stage, that was very interesting. And the new Gregg Distributors on riverside west, the original building, there's been additions since then, was built. OK, and 2001 the Extra Foods opened in the west end.

**Mary** Of course, that's the year that the planes flew into the Pentagon, 2001. And of course, this was a big year for us, because Jamie Salé and David Pelletier were just starting to become famous, and Jamie is my daughter-in-law's niece. So we went to see them win the Canadian championship.

**Mary** Now, 2002, now we're getting right up here aren't we? The A&W and the Super 8 motel opened, a new apartment building on the south end. 2003, that's when they stripped the old hotel back to the original brick. Gustafson's Auto Clinic burned.

**Mark** Oh, did it? I didn't know that.

**Mary** And of course, because my boys are farmers, the SARS outbreak was bad, called Mad Cow Disease in 2003. 2004, the new senior's centre opened on July 1st. And we had a new mayor, Richard Verhaeghe. Oh, yes, that was the year, the 2004-2005 season hockey strike because they wanted more money. Then of course 2005 was the tragedy at Mayerthorpe.

**Mark** Can you tell me more about the tragedy in Mayerthorpe? The four Mounties were shot, you know?

**Mary** And 2006 has lots of controversy over the building of the multiplex, and we had the Venus Cafe and it changed hands and became the Grizzly Grotto. I'm not sure what it is now. It's something else. Housing prices were very high in 2007. 2008, the multiplex opened in March. In 2009, the Community Centre was torn down to make room for the new Buy-Low.

**Mark/Mary** It was 2008 when that opened, was it? Yup.

**Mark/Mary** Yeah, wow, it just doesn't seem that long ago to me. I know.

**Mark** Time just flies.

**Mary** 2009, the Canadian Tire and Mark's Work Wearhouse opened and Day's Inn opened. 2010 Buy-Low's new store opened and Barb Klaczek's new store on the corner had to be torn down and rebuilt. And Turnabout Place opened, and Dr. Brown's building was torn down after the fire in the spring. Athabasca's had a lot of fires, you know. Yeah.

**Mary** Of course, 2011 was the 100th anniversary of the Town and a lot of people came back for that. 2012, Barb Klaczek's business finally opened. In 2013, which was a blow to this town for a lot of people, Sears closed here and that was the year of the terrible floods in High River.

**Mark** I just have a few odd things here. We talked about how you met your spouse, and you could talk about your children if you wanted to.

**Mary** Okay, my oldest son is Kelly, and he farmed all his life, except for a number of years, he had the Ford dealership here. And then he sold it and went back farming. He's got a big, he and his son, or two sons, have beef cattle and they have a bull sale every year.

And my other son lives just half a mile down the road from him, it's both on our land that my husband had. And he mostly grain farms and trucks, and they have two sons and one son has three children, two on that end and the one in the middle.

And then my other son has two sons and a daughter. And her son, the oldest son. Well, they both farm with him, but one kind of does the grain farming and the other does the

cattle, and Cheryl lives on my place where I used to live. She has one little boy and her husband works at the Athabasca University. They both have degrees in drama and in the theater. Cheryl was accepted as one of the only 13 in Canada for that program, and so she's got a background in theater.

**Mark** So how many years do you think you taught altogether?

**Mary** Well, you know, it depends on whether you count... you had to retire. Let's see, you had to retire at 65 and I retired at 55. So I taught... let's see, I was 55. I was 18 when I started teaching thirty-seven, but then I taught another 12 years of music, you know, privately. Actually, I'm still teaching. I don't know.

**Mark** So, you never stopped basically.

**Mary** Say about 50 years, I guess, here or there. And of course, my background is from England. Both my parents came from England.

**Mary** When I was 11 years old, I got pneumonia and spent three months in hospital. I had to have my lung tapped and drained. Other than that I have been in fairly good health all my life.

**Mark** Wow, it's pretty serious stuff, though.

**Mary** Yeah, but I've still got the letters in here that the children wrote me from school.

**Mark** Oh, that's nice.

**Mark** Do you remember any particular dances or community events or anything that you went to?

**Mary** Well, when I was in Bowden, we went to barn dances a lot and school dances, VMT dances and you know, when they sent those people out from England that got in trouble, their parents sent them out here. What did they call that? I can't remember what it was, but when they got in trouble with their families, rich families, they'd send them out here with some money to do something. And this Jimmy Witherspoon was one of those, and he built a great big dance hall close to Olds. And we went to that, around the Sundre area actually. And then when I came up here, we went to dances at Island Lake and South Athabasca. Atmore, that's where I met my husband at Atmore, at a dance. Community center on New Year's Eve.

**Mark** So the last thing I have on this sheet, I always like to ask is what advice would you give your grandchildren's generation?

**Mary** Oh, my goodness, that's interesting because I was just talking to my oldest granddaughter. She is very good in school, a great-granddaughter, I should say. She's



very good in school and she takes music lessons from me. She just wrote her Grade 4 exam but she's horse crazy. All she wants to do is ride horses [laughing].

**Mary** "You know," I said, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" And she says, "Well, you know, I don't know." And I said, "Well, my advice to you is at least get an education of some kind. So if you marry and your husband gets sick or dies, you'll have something to rely on." Yeah. You know, it's very important to do that, and I'm certainly glad I did. Like I told her, now I can be here and get nearly as much money as I did teaching with my pension. And, you know, it's because I worked all my life.

**Mark** Yup, from ATA.

**Mary** Yeah. Well, of course, I think I wrote up a little thing somewhere on my advice for my grandchildren. You know, I guess I have to remember where it is now. But it was something about, you know, living and being happy, and helping others, and believing in God.

**Mark** Yeah, sounds good.

[End of Interview]

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