Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
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Narrator: Larry Armfelt (for Richard Armfelt)
Interviewer: Brenda Gilboe
April 1, 2022

[Start of Interview]

Brenda April 1st, Larry Armfelt recording his brother's history, Richard Armfelt.

Larry My name is Larry Armfelt and I'm doing this on behalf of my brother Dick. Dick has passed away since he recorded this or he wrote this report in 2008, and it was done for his granddaughter Kaylan, as a school project. So this report was done by Dick. Whenever it refers to me or my, it is referring to Dick and not to myself. So I'm very pleased to be doing this because Dick was very meticulous in his lifestyle and in his job and he was very accurate.

In December of 2007, my granddaughter Kaylan (and of course, when I say my granddaughter, that means Dick's granddaughter, not mine), as a school project, picked me as an ancestor to write a report on. I wrote the following to try and set the record straight and clear up any misconceptions.

My parents' names were Hans Merdin Armfelt and Helen Martha Armfelt (nee Lynk). My dad was born in Hellerup on July 29th, 1905. This is where he grew up. Hellerup at that time was an independent municipality to the north of Copenhagen, but now I think it's all Copenhagen. At that time, the family's surname was Andersen. By 1913, there were so many people living in that particular area with the same last name that the post office had a difficult time keeping their mail sorted correctly. So the post office put up a list of acceptable surnames on the wall and asked if some of the Andersen families would mind changing their surnames to one of those on the list. My grandmother decided she liked the name Armfelt, so that was how our surname became. (Larry - A little ad lib here, as my grandmother didn't want to change from the letter A, because she had it engraved on silverware and napkins and so on, so she wanted to make sure it still started with the letter A.)

My mother was born on December 30th, 1913, at home on the farm near the community of Sweet Valley, which was near Lomond, Alberta. There were seven kids born in my mom's family. Four were born in the US - Harold, Madeline or Madge, Nadine and Donald. The family then moved to southeastern Alberta in 1910. They moved from nearby Tracy, Minnesota, while other members of the family moved up from around Eldora, Iowa. After moving to Alberta, three more children were born - Glenn, Mom and

Bernard (who was Johnny), and one died Donald. He died at the age of two and just over eight months of a burst appendix.

My mother and her family moved to Athabasca in 1931. My dad was already there, having come over from Copenhagen in 1928 and moving to the Athabasca area in 1929.

My parents were married October 11th, 1933, in the Anglican Church in Athabasca. They had planned to get married on the 1st of October, but the weather was bad, so they postponed it until the 11th. So on that day, my mother's brother Glenn drove my parents and Omar McDonald (the bachelor that was living with dad) to Athabasca with a wagon and a team of horses. They were married with my Uncle Glenn and Omar as witnesses. Glenn and Omar were also the only guests at the wedding. My uncle then drove my parents back to their home, a 12' by 12' log cabin in the middle of the bush, 14 miles west of Athabasca. Dad had already acquired the quarter section (160 acres) with a cabin on it in the fall of 1932. He bought it from a couple of Swedish brothers by the name of Fernstrom, who were then planning to go trapping in northern Saskatchewan.

It is difficult nowadays to imagine a man and wife living in a one room 12' by 12' log shack. The present-day average size smaller bedroom is about 10' by 12'. In this one room cabin was a double bed (four and a half by six), crib (two by three), cook stove (two by three), table, chairs, a home-made linen closet (a foot and a half by three) in one corner, and room in another corner to pile wood for the stove. There would also have been a stand for a water-bucket and wash basin to sit on, another stand for the milk separator, and a small cupboard for dishes, cutlery and pots and pans. So there wasn't too much floor space left.

As can be seen in the following photo (this would be on page three), the original old log cabin had only one window in it, measuring about two feet by three feet on the east wall. And in the dead of winter, it wouldn't be light till about 9:00 in the morning and it would be getting dark near 3:30 in the afternoon, so it made for a rather dark interior in the cabin. There was no such thing as electricity (meaning no lights, plugs, running water, flush toilet or electric heat), so the only light in the place was from a kerosene lamp, much like the one below. And there's a picture and description of the kerosene lamp.

The lamp didn't give off much light. It would still be rather dark if you were any distance from it. But you could read by it if you were close enough to it. I know we even put quite complicated jigsaw puzzles together, working on the table with the lamp light right beside the puzzle at that time.

Now, the next part is things I remember before I turned four years old. I remember lying in my crib at the foot of my parents' bed and my mother reaching down with her foot, rocking the crib while she sang "The Wreck of the Old Number Nine." I wouldn't have been more than a year old then.

The following page is a picture of our house after 1948, so is there for reference.

I remember lying in my crib watching my dad build a linen closet in the northwest corner of the cabin. I'm sure I wasn't more than two years old at the time.

I remember my mom and I blowing kisses to the moon for Dad who was working up at the tie camp. I was only about 13 or 14 months old. It was during the winter of 1935-36, and Dad cooked for three weeks for a crew cutting railroad ties six miles west of the north end of Baptiste Lake. They had worked there from about December 18th, 1935, to January 8th, 1936, then gave up. There was just no money in it and the weather was too cold. During that time, Athabasca became officially known as the coldest place on the planet, with temperatures around -75 degrees Fahrenheit. I remember my Mom had to scratch a hole in the layer of the frost on the inside of the window so we could look out and see the moon.

I remember playing with the neighbor boy, Ron Woodford on the big logs that were laid as a foundation when my dad built the log addition to the original house in the fall of 1938. I would have been close to four years old then.

I remember a ride on my sled that went out of control. It was after a winter ice storm that turned all the road surfaces into a sheet of glare ice. It was impossible to walk on the road. For some reason, Henry Piché, one of the kids that lived in the Metis settlement down along the northwest side of Baptiste Lake was up at our house, and he and I decided to go for a ride on my sled. Henry was about five years older than I, so he laid on his stomach on the sled, and I laid on top of him and tried to hang on. There was quite a hill dropping down from the house for about 250 meters along the old road. And I'm sure we must have been going about 30 miles an hour when we tipped over. I slid on the ice for some distance on my face. When I got back up to the house, my face was a bloody mess and looked like a raw hamburger. I think I was about four years old when this occurred.

I'll give you an idea of what the roads were like during the 1930s and '40s. The road coming up to our place from Baptiste Lake was simply a one lane wagon trail that wound around across the creek and up the hills, hence the name Winding Trail School. In those days, many of the roads to farms and homesteads were cut out and built by the settlers themselves. I can remember when the road was first cut through the bush south along the east side of the quarter section that my parents occupied. I can remember my dad, my Uncle Glenn, Julius Katona senior and a funny bachelor by the name of John Labovich, all cutting the road through. I remember one particular hot summer day that I had the job of carrying fresh, cold water to the crew. I brought the water to them in a glass jar that held about one and a half liters. The problem was, I never seemed to get past John Labovich. He always seemed to position himself so that he was first in line when I arrived with the water. By the time he was satisfied, there was just a bit left for the others and I would have to trudge back for another jar. I must have been about five years old at that time.

During a hot, dry summer and fall, the roads were quite passable, even for a car. But in the spring, and during and after a good rain in the summer or fall, there would be stretches of mud, lovely blue gumbo, and the ruts that resulted would often be one to one and a half feet deep. My mother told me of the time that she was riding on the wagon seat with me on her lap and my dad driving the horses. They were about 200 meters east of the house on the old trail. It was in the spring, and the trail at that spot was very muddy. The wagon ruts in the mud were deep, but suddenly the wagon wheel on my Mom's side dropped into a particularly deep hole and lurched back up again. I flew out of my Mom's lap and landed face down in the muddy rut, directly in front of the oncoming front wheel of the wagon. My dad hollered 'Whoa!' and the horses stopped immediately, with a wheel inches from my head. The horses didn't move. They knew they didn't dare with my dad at the reins, and my Mom got down and rescued me.

Most cars were not used in the winter. The side roads were never snowplowed. So the radiators and gas tanks were drained. The cars were jacked up, blocks were put under the axles and the wheels were removed to take the strain off the tires and tubes. Then, during the winter, most farmers drove a sleigh with a team of horses. I can remember riding to town with my dad one winter and putting the horses in the livery stable while doing whatever we had to do in town. I can remember almost exactly where the livery stable was. (Larry - To do a little ad lib here, the livery stable was approximately very close to where Dr. Morill's dentist clinic is now.)

There was a Dane working there as a hostler. His name was John Defries. He was known as "Little John" because he was quite a short fellow. The main highway wasn't paved from Clyde to Athabasca. It went through all the little towns and most of it wasn't even gravelled. During World War II, after Pearl Harbour, the Americans started worrying about the Japanese invading Alaska. So they hurried and built a highway from Edmonton through Athabasca to Dawson Creek and on up to Alaska. This at least improved the highway portion of the drive from our house to Athabasca.

When I was quite young, I was plagued with bronchitis. Because of this, my parents decided I shouldn't start school until September of 1941. I was close to seven years old. Even then, I can remember running around recess and noon and playing myself out. I would have to stop and lean up against the school while I literally gasped for air. However, I must have been a fast learner. I know by Christmas of 1941, I was reading comic books. Later on that same winter, I was passed into grade two and started into grade three the following September, and I was still only seven years old. That was why I was still only 13 when I started grade nine.

I always quite enjoyed reading and it seemed I was always picked on to read in front of the class. I also enjoyed vocabulary and spelling. I recall one incident that emphasized this. It was during recess one school day, I must have been about eight years old, and Julius Katona, who is about five years older than I, was splitting up some large blocks of firewood as part of his duties as janitor. This was being done as usual inside the schoolroom near the woodpile adjacent to the stove. Some of us younger kids were standing around watching and horsing around amongst ourselves at the same time.

Somehow I got pushed, stumbled out and put my hand down on the block to catch my balance just as Julius brought the axe down on the block. The blade of the axe made contact with the finger next to my index finger on my left hand. Because the blade was quite dull, my finger was not chopped off. The blade just sort of smashed the bone and made an ugly tear in my finger. The teacher cleaned it up, put a bandage on it and wanted me to go home so my mother could look after it. However, I knew there was a spelling test coming up right away and I didn't want to go home until I had written it. The teacher relented and let me write the test. Then I walked home.

As I mentioned before, the original log cabin was 12' by 12', which is 144 square feet of living space. Jack was born in February of 1938 and we started to use the new 12' by 16' log addition that my dad built on about November 1938. So for about ten months after Jack was born, all the four of us had for living quarters was the old original log cabin. After November 1938, we had 144 plus 192 equals 336 square feet of living space. Larry, the fifth child, was born in 1944, so all seven of us parents and kids lived in that 336 square feet until 1948. Nowadays, the average family with a couple of kids wouldn't think of living in a house with less than about 1,500 square feet.

Sometime during the mid-forties, we acquired a lamp that gave a much better light than the old kerosene lamp. It burnt naphtha, or white gas, and gave us a light roughly equivalent to a 100-watt bulb. (Larry - It looked much like the one on the next page, and on the next page he's got a diagram of it in the picture.)

While growing up, all of us kids had certain chores to do. There was wood, there was coal, wood and water to be brought in and ashes to be taken out of the three stoves. There were cows to be milked twice a day; barn to clean; horses, pigs and cows to feed and water. At times there were eggs to gather and chickens to look after. The milk had to be separated, supper dishes done and lunches made for school the next day. It kept us all quite busy. I can remember carrying wood in when I was barely old enough to walk. I also remember my parents deciding when I was about six years old that I should learn to milk a cow. It was summertime and this gentle old cow was standing outside. So I sort of sneaked up with a bucket and without letting her know what was happening, grabbed one of her teats and started pulling. I was immediately kicked over backwards and the cow trotted off.

(Larry - And then there's the picture of the kerosene lamp here with the mantles and so on.)

So during the summer, insects were always a problem. Mosquitoes started in the early summer and there were literally clouds of them. Then there were black flies, sand flies, noseeums, and the big horse flies. During the evenings in the summer we always kept a bucket and a smudge in it, just outside the screen door. Someone would start a fire in a bucket, keep it going and make it smoke good through green grass, leaves or sawdust on it. Sawdust worked best. However, the sand flies and noseeums would come right through the screen.

When I was young, we had no car, so I became quite familiar with riding horseback at an early age. We only had one saddle and my dad used that, so I learned to ride bareback. The first time I ever rode a horse I was about five years old. My dad lifted me up onto the horse. Then we rode alongside another horse. We rode down to the gate at a sedate walk, but coming back he got both horses trotting, then galloping. There was a tree that had fallen across the trail on the way to the barn, and it lay suspended about a foot and a half above the trail. When my horse came to the tree, she immediately went from a gallop to a dead stop in a split second. I didn't stop. I went sailing over it, winding up on the ground just in front of her. She calmly jumped over me and the log and went up to the barn.

In 1944, my dad traded a cow for a 1929 Chevrolet sedan. It was our first car. Before he brought the car home, he cut off the back half and replaced it with a wooden box, making a sort of pickup out of it for more room. I remember my first driving lesson. I was 11 years old. My dad drove out to the middle of the field, stopped and told me to get in and drive. After getting it in gear and moving, I completely froze at the wheel. My dad got it stopped before I went straight into the bush at the edge of the field, and we started over. This time I managed okay. I was probably assigned the task of hauling barrels of cream cans of water for household use, first from the well, later from the creek down by the school.

I attended Winding Trail School from grades 1 to 8, inclusive. It was a one-room school with one teacher teaching the kids in all eight grades at once. There might be anywhere from 15 to 25 kids at the school in any one year. There was no electricity in the school. Therefore, school was taught during daylight hours. So in the dead of winter, the school days were necessarily shorter. Toilets were two backhouses, one for the boys and one for the girls, a couple hundred feet south of the school. Heat was provided by a big barrel heater laying flat. It was at least five feet long and two feet in diameter. It would hold a lot of wood. There was a sort of sheet metal fence standing on each side of the stove to stop the kids from getting in too close.

We lived only a half mile from the school, so I took on the duties as janitor in September of 1946. My duties were –

> After school was over that day I would sweep the floor. The floor was oiled wooden boards, empty any water left in the water pail and the drinking cooler, haul in enough firewood for the next day and chop kindling for starting the fire the next morning. In the morning, I would go down to the school about 7:15, start a roaring fire, bank it well so it would keep going, and return home. I would then do a few chores, have breakfast and head back to the school. On my way down, I would pick up a pail of water at a spring that we had a trail to. It still meant carrying the water half a mile. I would get back to the school early to make sure it was warm enough for the class. Then all during the day, I would occasionally stoke the fire to keep the room warm. The people in the community decided if the temperature was colder than -50 degrees Fahrenheit or -45 Centigrade on any given morning, there would be no school that day. Some of the kids had to walk more than two miles one way to the school. I had this janitor work for ten months,

the school year of 1946-47, and received $8 per month as payment, which my parents promptly confiscated. The following year, I split the duties with one of the other kids. I don't remember what I got for doing that.

Upon completing grade eight at Winding Trail School or any of the rural schools at that time, a good percentage of the kids did not go any further with their education. It was too far to Athabasca with no way to get in and out, and in Athabasca there wasn't much in the way of hostels or dorms for the kids to stay in. I had quite a time getting in and out myself. I think for most of grade nine I walked down to Appleby's just over two miles and caught a ride with Jack Appleby, who was teaching grade nine in Athabasca. His son Ted, who was also in grade nine, rode in also.

Then about a year later, Mike Kwasney put a piece of canvas over the back of a three-quarter ton truck with a bench down each side to sit on and called it a school bus. He ferried all the kids in each day from Forfar to Athabasca that were in grades 9 to 12. He also drove down to Appleby's to pick me up. Ted continued riding with his dad. Mike quit running his school bus after a while, so I was left either catching a ride with Jack Appleby again or with my dad, who by then had a job working for an office in Athabasca as a field supervisor for the county. Then Mark Christensen purchased a van and ran it as a school bus from Forfar to Athabasca. He also came down well out of his way and picked me up at Appleby's, but he decided one day that he wasn't going to pick me up anymore. It was just too far out of his way. So again, I was left to get in and out of Athabasca with either Jack Appleby or my dad. It was quite a hit and miss arrangement. If I rode in with my dad, I was often a few minutes late. It was hard to get him mobile in the mornings. And I can remember walking down to Appleby's on two different bitterly cold mornings, only to find that they had left early. They didn't know I was coming down on any of these occasions when I missed both rides and walked home from Athabasca (14 miles). Getting home was just as uncertain. I remember doing that on my last day of grade 12. It was a short school day. We were out by noon and somehow I missed Jack Appleby, so I walked home. This was in 1952.

In the three full years I attended Athabasca High School, the temperature during the coldest part of the winter never failed to get down to -72 degrees Fahrenheit, at least once each winter. On mornings like that, the tires of the car would be frozen flat on the bottom. If and when you did get the car running, you would have to drive slowly at first thumping along until the tires got warm enough to reassume their original shape.

In August of 1952, I got a job with a survey crew working for the Technical Division, Department of Lands and Forests for the Alberta Government. I quite enjoyed surveying, so in September of 1954, I attended the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (now SAIT and that's the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. There was no NAIT at that time, and NAIT was the northern Alberta Institute of Technology) in Calgary to take the first of a two-year course in surveying and drafting. Tuition, books, room and board, etc. – the whole works cost me about $900 for that first year (room and board was $45 per month, and there was lots to eat.) I had saved that much from working on the survey crew. I had signed on as an articling pupil to an Alberta land

surveyor (G. Palsen). (Larry - G was George Palsen, and I actually worked for George Paulsen in 1964 along the Snipe River and Snipe Lake with about 20 natives from the Sturgeon Lake Reserve. So he was working at one level and I was working at another.) And then in 1955, I went back to the Provincial Institute of Technology (P.I.T.A.) in September of 1955, graduating in May of 1956. I then started studying and writing exams for my Alberta Land Surveyors commission, meanwhile working as well. At that time there was no degree course in any university by which you could obtain a Land Surveyors commission – you had to do it on your own. Exams were written at the University in Edmonton once a year in April. The time I put in at the Provincial Institute of Technology in Calgary didn't count for anything toward my Land Surveyors commission, other than familiarizing me with surveying as a career and some things I might come up against as a surveyor. I finally got my ALS, the Alberta Land Surveyors commission, on June 5th, 1961. I added it all up one time, and after getting out of high school, I think I wrote a total of 57 three-hour exams until getting my ALS commission.

In March of 1959, I bought a house in Edmonton at 9202 90th Street. I paid $13,500 for it. Also, that March, I met Kayla Park. At the time she was working in the Athabasca Hospital as a certified nursing aide. (Larry - I want to ad lib here, too. The reason he met Kayla in the Athabasca Hospital was because I was in there with pneumonia and Kayla was a nurse that was looking after me and Dick came to visit me. That's how Kayla and Dick met, because I got pneumonia.) Kayla and I were married on June 10th, 1961, in her hometown of Lethbridge. We then moved into the house I had bought in Edmonton, where we lived until 1973. During those 12 years, I was employed by the Technical Division, Department of Lands and Forests as an Alberta land surveyor doing legal survey work for them. They also had me doing horizontal and vertical control work for mapping from aerial photos.

Our son David was born September 20th in 1962, then Russell was born October 23rd, 1963.

(Larry - This is bringing this up to present times.) In 1973, we bought Long Beach Resort on Shuswap Lake near Sorrento, B.C. It was a lovely spot to live, but a lot of hard work for very little return. I had to learn in a big hurry how to install, maintain and repair sewage lines, waterlines, septic tanks, plumbing, floor and ceiling tile, electric stoves, etc., just to keep the place maintained. I also had to work out to make ends meet. The first job I had, in the fall of 1973, was working on a green chain at a local sawmill at Tappen Valley Timber. Then in January 1974, I got a job working for a surveyor in Kamloops (Stan Legget). It meant driving to Kamloops and back every day, 100-mile round trip. I stuck with that for about six months until the tourist season was in full swing. Then, in the fall of 1974, I got a job with a surveyor in Salmon Arm, a Mr. M.D. Brown. I worked for him for about four years. Then in the early part of 1980, I got a job working for a local contractor in Blind Bay, building and renovating houses, and the carpenter's name was Shel Herrick. I worked for him for about five years. I quit working after the tourist season ended in the fall of 1985. We were finally making enough money from the resort to scrape by 'til the next tourist season.

Our son David died in a traffic accident June 27th, 1981. He was 18. Kayla passed away of cirrhosis of the liver on April 28, 2002. I managed to finally sell the resort to a developer on July 30th, 2004. I then moved to Salmon Arm, B.C., where I now rent a very comfortable apartment, #202, 531 First Avenue Southeast.

(Larry - And going back to the original reason that Dick did this was for Kaylan's project in 2008. And he has a little addendum here.) By the way, Kaylan got an “A” on her report. (Larry - So just again, I want to thank everybody and Brenda Gilboe for making this possible to get Dick's history.)

[End of Interview]

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