

## Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project Transcription of Barb Wilkinson recording 2017.mp3

[http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/b\\_wilkinson.htm](http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/b_wilkinson.htm)

Narrator: Barb Wilkinson  
Interviewer: Rosemary Neaves  
January 18, 2017

[Start of Interview]

**Rosemary** It is January 18th, 2017. My name is Rosemary Neaves and I am sitting with Barb Wilkinson in her lovely new apartment in Athabasca. We are going to embark on stories from Barb's life. And before we do that, I just want to go through the history in terms of Barb's maiden name and so on. Barb's full name is Barbara Ann Wilkinson.

**Rosemary** Barb's maiden name is Hargrave. Her father's name was Harry Hargrave. Her mother's name was Ruth McElory Hargrave. Barb's birthday is July 18th, 1935. Her place of birth is Medicine Hat, Alberta. Her husband's name was Robert Alan Wilkinson. Okay, let's start, Barb.

**Barb** I was born in Medicine Hat, but I lived at the Dominion Range Experimental Station, 40 miles south of Manyberries, 100 miles south of Medicine Hat, 5 miles from the American border, and 10 miles from the Saskatchewan border.

The first year mom and dad were down there, they lived in a tar paper shack with no conveniences. Mom had grown up in Edmonton so that was quite a shock. Then dad was made superintendent of the range station and they moved into a house that had running water. So that's about when I came along. I had a very happy childhood there, because I rode horses. I had a pet antelope every summer.

**Rosemary** A pet antelope?

**Barb** Why, yes, the cowboys would bring in a baby antelope and I'd bottle feed it all summer. And then they'd go off with the herd in the fall. So it was a perfect fit. But there were horned toads, scorpions, and ticks that carried Rocky Mountain spotted fever. You could be vaccinated for Rocky Mountain spotted fever. But there were five shots, a week apart. And it was 100 miles of dirt road into Medicine Hat and so we went in for the first shot one year. You had to get this every year and dad watched the doctor inoculate me. And he said, "Well, I can inoculate calves, so I guess I can do her." And so, he got the serum and inoculated my sister and myself. Once a week, mom would stand in front of us with a chocolate bar and he'd give us a shot.

What else happened down there? I said mom was teaching me.

**Rosemary** Yes. For four years.

**Barb** Yeah. But I took five years of correspondence lessons. She taught me for four years but then we moved to Medicine Hat, rented a house there, and commuted back and forth. My sister Norma started school then. We were in Medicine Hat for two years.

When we were at home, she taught me correspondence lessons and we had Sunday school every Sunday morning, which was sort of amazing. I had a desk in my bedroom.

We'd start the day for school with a song at the piano and then I'd march into my bedroom. We'd start school and at 10:30 we had a recess and she peeled potatoes for dinner at noon. And then she went from 1:30 until 4:00, a regular school day.

**Barb** So we had two years in Medicine Hat. And what did I do there? Well, I went to Riverside School. I belonged to Brownies. And then we moved to Swift Current. Dad was in charge of cattle. And in Swift Current, I belonged to CGIT (Canadian Girls in Training) and Girl Guides. We were just there two years. Then we moved to Lethbridge where I took my high school. While I was there, I curled and belonged to CGIT again.

What did I do that was memorable in Lethbridge? Well, I was sent to a leadership camp in Jasper at Lake Edith at the end of Grade 11. There were two of us from Lethbridge that went. Then I finished my Grade 12 and I'd just turned 17. And I went off to the University of Alberta to take a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. And I was there four years. Four calendar years, because it was the first of a four-year program.

I stayed in Pembina Hall the first year and then the second year in May, we went into the hospital. But there was no room for us in the nurses' residence. So we rented the Theta house and I was a Theta. We hired a cook and a housekeeper and stayed there for the summer. The rest of the nurses hated us because we had no restrictions on when we had to get home. So in the fall, we moved into the nurses' residence and went through nursing training, and then one year back at university.

And where did I stay then? I think I went back to Pembina Hall. During the last four months I had a month in psychiatry at Oliver and a month in a rural hospital in Medicine Hat. That was very handy because my grandmother lived there. After that I spent a month in public health in Lethbridge and convocated in September. From there I went to Westlock to work for one year to pay off my bursary.

I met Bob there. In Westlock we curled, but I met him playing badminton. And we curled and I led Brownies. I was president of the Kinettes and he was a Kinsman. That was later after we got married. We got married in 1958. I was president of the nurses' chapter then.

And then I stayed home. I worked briefly in the Westlock Hospital. Very briefly. But David was born in 1963 and Pat in 1965. And then in 1967 we moved to Athabasca. In Westlock, Bob had been Assistant Secretary of the MD (Municipal District) and then Town Secretary. And then he worked for Bott and Bruha, an accounting firm.

When we moved to Athabasca in 1967 Bob was County Administrator. I stayed home until Janet was two. She was born in 1967. She was our Centennial project. When she was two, I went to work part-time for the Health Unit as a public health nurse. That was 1969. Well, I was only part-time for a short while, and then I became full-time. I had a come-in babysitter stay with the kids. Then I became CEO of the Health Unit because we had no Medical Officer of Health.

**Rosemary** Do you remember what year that was?

**Barb** About 1970. It covered an area from Kinuso on the west to Rich Lake on the east, including Lac La Biche, Calling Lake, Smith, and Athabasca. So there was lots of driving involved. We bought the farm in 1975.

**Rosemary** That's when the farm goes back to then? 1975?

**Barb** And I retired, one of the many times that I retired. Well, we had cattle in the summer, bantam chickens, and Pat started raising sheep because the kids were in the 4-H Club in Colinton. He did well with the sheep—they helped put him through university.

**Rosemary** Is that right?

**Barb** Yeah. And we had horses. Two or three of them over the years. What did I belong to? Well, the Nurses' Chapter again and I retired from the Health Unit in 1975 to spend time at home with the kids.

In 1982, Bob lost his job at the County. I went and took a refresher course at the University Hospital and came back and worked at the hospital with the trailers. I hadn't worked in the hospital for 26 years, so that was sort of interesting and I really enjoyed it.

When they built the new hospital, I was charge nurse on auxiliary. I ended up as charge nurse in acute care. At that time, we had 42 beds in acute care, and we had over 100 deliveries a year. That is a little different from now. And it was fun. I really enjoyed getting back to bedside nursing, but I got tired of getting up at 6:30 in the morning. I moved over to home care and ended up as home care coordinator for the same area: Smith, Calling Lake, Wabasca, Boyle. I guess that was the area. I stayed there until I retired in 1996.

Bob and I did a lot of traveling. We were in Mexico 11 times. And we had a theater tour to London, England with David and Denise Armstrong, which was wonderful. Then we went to Portugal and Spain with Peggy and Glen Gilchrist. Bob died in 2010, and then I took two river cruises, one down the Danube with Karen Bradfield from Passau to Budapest. And then another one with John and Phyllis Shannon from Amsterdam to Antwerp. And then I went with Shannons to Ireland for two weeks.

And as an aside, John just wrote to me. He'd been over in Ireland and spread some of Phyllis's ashes on the River Shannon. That was a great trip. On our 50th wedding anniversary, 2008, we went to China.

**Rosemary** I remember that.

**Barb** Yeah, we were there for three weeks. We went to Shanghai, and then took a river cruise up the Yangtze River to Chongqing, which I had never heard of. It has 30 million people. We traveled at night and every day we took a tour somewhere—to a pottery factory or a silk factory or a school. And that was a wonderful trip and it had special meaning to me because I had a great aunt and uncle, Rob and Claudia McAmmond, who were missionaries in China from 1905 to 1935. They brought many wonderful things back from China. And I've been down in the States. When we were in Manyberries we went to Havre, Montana more often than Medicine Hat because the road was paved south of the border.

**Rosemary** You were so close to the border.

**Barb** Well, yeah.

**Barb** I'm going to go back to my first trip to Vancouver. Well, before that, we went down to Yellowstone Park when I was a year old and saw Old Faithful. And mom said I wouldn't get into the bathtub afterwards because of the water running.

**Barb** My first trip out to Vancouver was, well, I suppose in the '40s during the war, because when we went over the Cascades we stopped at Greenwood, BC. There was a Japanese internment camp there. They evacuated the Japanese from Vancouver to Greenwood. And I remember we stopped for lunch in a cafe and all they had was pie.

So anyway, we went on to Vancouver. Dad had to stop at Agassiz at the experimental station there. We went on and saw Stanley Park and some of the things in Vancouver.

Okay, and back to the Health Unit. We started the Early Intervention Program where we followed kids from birth to school age. We did developmental testing on them and then transferred that information onto the schools when they started school.

**Rosemary** That was a big, big program.

**Barb** Oh, yes, yeah, and it was very enjoyable. Daria Wallston was in Slave Lake at the time. Gail Robertson was in Slave Lake, and at Lac La Biche, Olive Skakun, and I can't remember who else.

Okay, on with our travels. I had two timeshares, one in Cabo San Lucas and one in Fairmont. So we went to Fairmont every year while Bob was alive. And went down to Cabo San Lucas twice.

**Rosemary** Where is that?

**Barb** South of San Diego, right down on that corner. I gave that timeshare to David, and he and Kim just got back from there this last weekend. And after I retired in 1996, we drove across Canada and took seven weeks to do it. We stayed in hotels and motels and we went right through to Newfoundland.

**Rosemary** Did you really?

**Barb** Yeah, we spent a week in St. Jovite, Quebec and then toured around Montreal and Quebec City. Then we went on to Newfoundland and then came back to Digby, Nova Scotia. We took the ferry over to Maine and spent a week in a timeshare in Maine before driving home. That trip was 20,000 kilometers.

And then a couple of years later, David was in the RCMP up in Fort McPherson in the Northwest Territories. So we drove the Alaska Highway. We went to see them, and went right up to Inuvik. We drove the Dempster Highway and then we went over to Fairbanks, down to Skagway, way back over to Whitehorse. From there we went to Dawson City. We then came back down through Kitwanga, and then back home on Highway 16. That was a 14,000-kilometer trip.

**Rosemary** Was the Dempster paved at that time?

**Barb** No, it was shale. But we had no problems, no cracks in our windshield, no car problems. But coming back from Fort McPherson ... well, first of all, we had to wait three extra days because there'd been a lot of rain and the river was up so we couldn't take the ferry across. We stayed with David and Terry and waited until we could get on the ferry again.

**Barb** The only town between there and Dawson City is Eagle Plains. When we were driving, we ran into a couple having car trouble. Bob got out and tried to help them with it. He figured it was a timing problem, so we gave them a ride into Eagle Plains. They were an American couple who had rented a car in Anchorage and were traveling back down to the States. I don't know what happened to them after we dropped them off at Eagle Plains. They had to get their truck towed into Eagle Plains to get it fixed.

Now, other travels. I have been down in the States to Palm Desert two or three times. One year we went to Daytona Beach. My brother-in-law, who is Jamaican, came and they stayed a couple of days with us there. Then we went on to Jamaica and stayed with Ainsley Morris.

Ozzie's brother, half-brother ... that was interesting. His mother ... well, his father had three alliances. And so, he had two half-brothers with the same father. And the mothers were all sisters, which is a little unusual.

Jamaica was interesting. But at Ainsley's house, there were bars on the windows, bars on the door, bars between the living area and the bedroom areas, and bars across the driveway. His cousin, David Campbell, drove us up to Ocho Rios and we looked around there. We had a week in a condo that Ainsley had there and it came with a cook, which was great. So we spent a week there. We flew home from Montego Bay. That was that trip. Did I mention that we went to Portugal and Spain?

**Rosemary** You did mention Portugal, but you didn't talk about it.

**Barb** Well, no, Portugal was wonderful. We were on the Algarve for a week, and then we went up to Lisbon for a week. And while we are on the Algarve, we went over to Seville in Spain and saw the most beautiful building with mosaic tiles all around it. And where else have we been?

Oh, we've been out to the coast several times and I still go out there because I have three cousins on the island and one good friend in White Rock. I didn't do it last year, but I'll do it this year. Where else have I been?

**Rosemary** You have a sister in Winnipeg, don't you?

**Barb** Yes, I did. She's since moved to Edmonton.

**Rosemary** Oh, is that right?

**Barb** Yeah. She has a daughter in Edmonton, Heather, and Graham Tipples. And they have four kids. And Norma and Ozzie are living in Canterbury Court. Their other daughter, Suzanne, is a lawyer and she works for Telus and lives in Vancouver, so they decided it would be handier to move to Edmonton. Ozzie is 90 years old but he's in good health.

And something else. Well, I came from a ranching family. They ranched 40 miles east of Medicine Hat. My great grandfather came to Medicine Hat in 1883 and he was a trader. He'd worked for the Hudson's Bay Company out of Winnipeg. He got a lot of cattle in trade and he didn't have room for them in Medicine Hat. So, he and his friend, Little Corn, a Cree, and my grandfather, who was 10, snowshoed 40 miles east of Medicine Hat where Little Corn thought it would be a good place to establish a ranch. And that's how it started.

**Rosemary** Wow, isn't that interesting?

**Barb** The ranch is still in the family. The fifth generation is running it. We had a 125th reunion in 2013, and there were 300 people there, all relatives or friends. The ranch was a big part of my childhood because we'd go there for Christmas and during the war, two of my uncles and one of my aunts were overseas with the army. It was a worrisome time for Grandma and Grandpa. My other grandparents lived in Edmonton, so I saw a lot of them when I was in training because they lived in Garneau, not far from the University Hospital.

Now, what else? Well, on our honeymoon, we went down to, we were married in Lethbridge, went down to Saint Mary's and over to Seattle and back up through Canada. I mentioned the trip to China. And we went to Palm Springs several times. I think that's about it.

**Rosemary** You've done a lot of traveling.

**Barb** Yeah.

**Rosemary** My goodness, I had no idea.

**Barb** Yeah, well, we really enjoyed traveling.

**Rosemary** Sure, and you still do.

**Barb** Oh, yeah. And then we bought the farm in 1975 and lived out there for 42 years. I mentioned this before, that we had cattle and horses, sheep, and bantam chickens, and rabbits. All those interesting things.

**Rosemary** The rabbits that keep increasing in numbers and so on?

**Barb** Well yes, but the coyotes get them too. The last cat I had a coyote got. So this one's about three years old.

**Rosemary** Yes, it's Fluffy right?

**Barb** Yeah.

**Rosemary** She keeps putting her two cents worth in on this interview.

**Barb** Yeah, she's always around. She's good company.

**Rosemary** Oh, for sure. Did you want to talk a bit? I mean, you've done a lot of community volunteerism.

**Barb** Well, here in town, I was chairman of the FCSS (Family and Community Support Services) board for five years. And then I was president of the hospital auxiliary for a couple of years, three years, and I was president of the Nurses' Chapter here. And now I belong to a book club, and still the hospital auxiliary, and church activities. I play bridge over here at the Senior's Center. Yeah, just yesterday was the first day, but I played a lot of bridge when we were in training. We'd come off the evenings and play bridge in the lounge all night until the day staff went on the next day and then go to bed.

**Rosemary** Governing Council?

**Barb** Oh, yes. Well, NADC, I should talk a bit about it. It was very interesting because

**Rosemary** Can you just spell it out?

**Barb** NADC (Northern Alberta Development Council). We got into every little community in northern Alberta from High Level to, well one interesting place was Keg River, where we had lunch with Dr. Mary Percy Jackson. She had come over from England in 1926 and was hired by the provincial government to be a doctor up there. And while she was there, she met Frank Jackson, who had worked for my grandfather at Walsh on the ranch. And then he married Dr. Mary Percy and they had two kids and they ranched up there. He took cattle up by rail and then barged them down the Peace River to Keg River.

But those were very interesting years because we got into Conklin, Janvier, Fort Chipewyan, Dene Tha, Grande Cache. You know, 60% of the land area of Alberta is north of Athabasca, and only 20% of the people. We would fly. They'd pick me up in Athabasca with a small plane and I remember once coming back and the pilot didn't know where the airport was. He was looking where the old airport used to be. I pointed out to them that it had moved. So we landed at the right place.

I was the only woman on NADC and I was Vice-Chairman. When I finished that, I was on Governing Council of Athabasca University for five years. I was Vice-Chairman there and I think the only woman to begin with but there were others that came on later. I was there during their move from Edmonton to Athabasca. I used to go into Edmonton for meetings at 8:30 a.m. and I got two or three speeding tickets on the way in. But it was a time of great growth with the university. You know, it's been growing at 10% per year and it has 39,000 students.

My son-in-law, Gilbert Perras, worked 20 years at Athabasca University. He ended up as Registrar before he went up to Fort McMurray, to Keyano College. Now Gilbert is a manager in the Department of Advanced Education in Edmonton. Janet, my daughter, is an Occupational Health Nurse at NAIT. My son Pat graduated in agriculture and has a farm about 20 kilometers south of town. He and his wife, Christa, have a small herd of Charolais cross cattle.

I'm going back again, but dad brought the first Charolais cattle into Alberta. He'd been sent north in 1947 to survey the Canadian reindeer herd. He spent six weeks up there and we stayed with my grandparents in Edmonton. In 1952 there was a problem with dwarfism because there were just the four British breeds of cattle. So he was sent down to the States and visited every state west of the Mississippi going to ranches and feedlots. He decided that Charolais cattle should come into Canada. Then he and Dr. Pelletier revised the Gros Morne quarantine station in Quebec. I think it's Gros Morne. They imported other exotic breeds like Simmental and Chianina. And so that's another aside.

Well, my parents lived in Regina for a few years, so we went down there.

**Rosemary** Your dad was with PFRA (Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration), wasn't he?

**Barb** Yeah, he was with PFRA down there. And then he retired and became Alberta Marketing Commissioner, and he and mom visited 65 countries in eight years promoting

Alberta products. When they moved to Edmonton, I was so pleased because then they were close. I must mention that the Hargrave Ranch is 65,000 acres. They have 300 gas wells, and, of course, they've got the mineral rights. They run about 3,500 cows.

**Barb** Where else have I traveled to? Well, I go out to the coast often. And down into Montana and Florida. I haven't ever been to New York. Well, I think that's about it, Rosemary.

**Rosemary** Well, I just want to go back to the family. You mentioned Pat. You have another son, right?

**Barb** David. He spent 26 1/2 years in the RCMP and retired a year ago. He was a staff sergeant in charge of forensics for Alberta. And now he's Vice- President of the Katz Group, who own the Edmonton Oilers and the Oil Kings, in charge of security. He's just finished hiring 600 security people for the new arena. He's traveled down to Los Angeles twice, and also went to Winnipeg. He's a busy boy, but he always was. And I'm sort of glad he's out of the RCMP.

He was one of the first ones into Mayerthorpe when those Mounties were killed. And then when the three Mounties in Moncton were killed, he went down there for two weeks to investigate. But he got out alive, so that's something and he really enjoys his new job. His wife Kim teaches yoga and they've just moved into a different house, a bigger house. She's got a yoga studio in her basement.

And I have seven grandchildren. They range in age from 24 down to 10. Four boys and three girls. They're all either going to school or working. What have I missed?

**Rosemary** I don't think you missed anything. So, the next thing on your list is a trip to New York, right?

**Barb** No, no, I don't really care if I go to New York. I'll go out to the coast this spring.

**Rosemary** Yeah, break up the winter.

**Barb** Yeah, and I go to the Heartwood folk concerts. And my kid's recitals, they both take piano, Amy and Ben. What else do I do around here? Well, I'm active in the church.

**Rosemary** Yes, for sure.

**Barb** Well, I think I've run out of things to say, Rosemary.

**Rosemary** Okay. Life is good.

**Barb** Yes, it's always been good. Yeah, I've had many wonderful experiences. And I hope for more.

**Rosemary** Barb has thought of some other things that she would like to add to the recording. So what were some of these things, Barb?

**Barb** When I was in high school, I belonged to the Hi-Y, which is a YWCA organization. We had a trip to Regina where I heard Tommy Douglas speak and I was really impressed with him.



**Rosemary** He's quite a speaker.

**Barb** Oh, yes, yes, very inspirational. And then also in Lethbridge, I belonged to Mrs. Cull's choir through the church. In December, we sang carols for the whole month of December, from six to seven, from house to house and collected money for the church.

**Rosemary** Oh, for mission and service?

**Barb** Yeah.

**Rosemary** Oh, my gosh.

**Barb** Also in Lethbridge I belonged to Job's Daughters, which is an affiliate of the Masonic Lodge. My dad had been a Mason and mom had belonged to the Eastern Star. When I moved to Athabasca, I became a member of the Eastern Star and was Worthy Matron in 1982. Bob was also a member of the Eastern Star and he was a Mason.

And I wanted to tell you about the two cruises we were on. The first one was an Alaska cruise, where we went from Vancouver up to Skagway and then up to the glacier and then down through Ketchikan. At Skagway, we took the train out to Bennett Lake which was where the gold seekers went in the late 1800s. That was very interesting. Then we came back and went to Ketchikan and Sitka. Sitka was particularly interesting because it had been settled by Russians. Then we came back to Vancouver.

And the other cruise was a Panama Canal cruise that we took in 2010. We flew to Fort Lauderdale, got on a cruise ship, went down to Cartagena through the Panama Canal, and then we took a train trip back from the Pacific side to the Atlantic side. And then came back by bus, so that was fun. Now they've got a new canal, which is bigger.

**Rosemary** Yes, I've heard about that.

**Barb** The other thing I want to talk about is all the handiwork I've done over the years. I started doing petit point when I was in training and maybe made about seven or eight petit point pictures. I've given them all away. And then I did needlepoint. I made a needlepoint picture and a needlepoint cover for the stool in there.

And then I started knitting and I knit myself a sweater when I was in high school. And then I knit sweaters for all my kids and their spouses. And then I made crib quilts, handmade crib quilts, for each one of the grandchildren. And then I made afghans for each one of them, knit afghans.

**Rosemary** That's a lot of knitting.

**Barb** And that bedspread in there is one that I knit. We'll look at it later. And then I did a lot of cross stitch and some, well, I don't know, embroidery, I guess you'd call it. And so, I've got a couple of pictures that I'll show you later. But that's about it.

**Rosemary** Well, you're still knitting, aren't you?

**Barb** Well, yeah, I knit with the church knitting group.

**Rosemary** The United Church Yarn Ministry.

**Barb** Yeah. So that's, I think, all that I forgot.

**Rosemary** Okay.

**Barb** Okay.

**Rosemary** Well, thank you for that.

**Barb** You're welcome.

[End of Interview]

Machine transcribed by: trint.com  
Edited by: Brittney Sasseville  
Proof-read by: Rosemary Neaves

January, 2022