Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project Transcription of Nick Kucher recording 2016.mp3

http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/n_kucher.htm

Narrator: Nick Kucher Interviewer: Gregory Johnson

April 5, 2016

[Start of Interview]

Greg My name is Greg Johnson, and it's the 5th of April 2016 and this is Mr. Nick Kucher. He's going to talk about his time in Athabasca.

Nick Yeah, I'm going to start with what my dad was always inclined to do—move, immigrate somewhere.

So, when the news came out in the Ukraine that Canada was accepting immigrants and Argentina was also, my daddy, he applied to Argentina because he said it was a warmer country. When he came home and told my mother she says to him some of the neighbors are moving to Canada, not Argentina. She'd like to move with the neighbors so dad says that's okay, I can change the country. So, he changed the country and we came to Canada instead of Argentina. There were at least two families that came at the same time from our village and on the boat, as we were crossing, we met up with some more families that came from the neighboring villages. Mother knew some of those people.

There were nine families in all that immigrated. They didn't come on the same ship—some went on other ships. We were nine days out on the ocean and dad got seasick and mother says I had a hard time to walk on the ship because it was tossing too much.

Greg So do you remember where you landed in Canada?

Nick We landed in Saint John, New Brunswick. When I was in New Brunswick I tried to look it up and I found the place where the immigrants landed and all the names were there, but I couldn't find ours. The birth certificate says that we landed in Saint John and from Saint John I guess we moved to Montreal temporarily.

From Montreal we started going west. We were going to the farming country of the prairies and Alberta was the main destination.

Greg Was there any particular reason why Alberta?

Nick Well, Manitoba was pretty well filled up already and maybe even Saskatchewan so they said Alberta and we started going towards Alberta. Just a few miles before Winnipeg, my brother fell off the train. So, there was a problem. They tried to stop the train to look for him but the conductor said, we're not going to stop now till we get to

Winnipeg, it's only a few miles. So they stopped in Winnipeg and the authorities started phoning around but it was night.

Greg What time of year?

Nick In April. They formed a search party with section people who work on the railroad. Then they got on their vehicle and started going on the railroad. They saw a boy sitting on a rock crying. The railroad section crew phoned up right away. I don't know how he got to Winnipeg. He had a big gash so they put him in the hospital and we were delayed a week in Winnipeg waiting for him to recover. This is the picture they took—I'm not sure if it was in Winnipeg or already in Edmonton.

Greg So from Winnipeg you came straight to Edmonton?

Nick Yes in Edmonton they said there's land in Athabasca or Peace River and you have a choice. Dad questioned some people and they said all the good land in Athabasca was gone already you have to go to Peace River to get better land so my dad goes to Peace River and files for a half section of land there, good land. He comes home and mother again bawls him out. She said all the neighbors that came with us, they took land in Athabasca—how come you want to go to Peace River—I want to settle down with the neighbors. Okay, so he went to the land office here and crossed out the numbers and put a new number on the form. So he got the land in Athabasca, probably the poorest quarter in the country.

Greg Whereabouts was that at, do you remember?

Nick Where I lived all my life, northwest of here, 20 miles.

Greg Okay, out by Chain Lake area?

Nick Yeah, on the road to Chain Lake. We moved in there with all these families from our area in the Ukraine. There were nine families in all. So we stayed in the Immigration Hall in Athabasca for I don't know how many days, then we moved on to one farm where a farmer had moved out. I don't know what happened to him. He had built a house, and barn and chicken coop. Two families moved into the house and another two families moved into the chicken coop, and the rest moved into the barn. We stayed there and then dad took this quarter section of land. It wasn't too far maybe three miles, but far enough. So him, and I think it was one, two, three guys, say they will help us build our house and then we help build theirs. So, okay, good deal. So, they walked the three miles, there was no road to that homestead yet, and they start building that house. I remember these three guys that helped dad used to stay under a spruce tree in a tent.

Greg No electricity, no running water.

Nick No, no, not yet. Oh, that never came to that area; maybe 20 years later.

Greg Okay.

Nick They were building the next house, that was for Harry Waschuk's dad, the third house from my house now. The third guy was single so he said don't worry about a house just pay some wages—I don't know what I am going to do. This guy went back to the old country and he came back 10 years later, during the Second World War. He brought his family this time.

Nick So we lived in there and I remember moving in there for the winter. I was about two years old then. I wanted to go outside but mother said where are you going to go outside—the snow is four feet deep. The snow was deeper than I was tall. By spring she said, I'll let you out when the sun comes out. She let me out in the spring and I remember playing in front of the house in my shoes. I had two pairs of shoes. They were my horses already, and I'm playing. So that's the first memory I have of living there.

Greg So the first year, did you plant any crops or anything?

Nick There was nothing, no land. It was all bush for anyone who took a homestead there.

Greg So what did you eat?

Nick Search me, I don't know. They started clearing and dad cleared enough land from the bush, about one acre, to make a garden. My neighbor, he came from Scotland, our closest neighbor, he was given \$700 for an immigration payment. You see, he was a British subject so they paid in England \$700 to move to Canada. Of course, us Ukrainians didn't get anything. So, this Scotchman with that \$700 bought a tractor, a car, and a breaking plow—all for \$700. So, first thing we hired him to break that one acre we cleared and after that we had a garden.

After that, dad was clearing more land and he took half a section there. One quarter was for my half-brother, John Bosik's father. They both started clearing land but there was no money to buy food with. But dad had, I guess, quite a bit of money from the old country because my neighbor told me my dad was rich. He said he had \$1,000. But anyway, my dad started working for people, farmers that had settled there. They were there already for over 10 years and they were getting well off. They could afford to hire a man so he worked for them for 50 cents a day. He was clearing brush—worked hard for 50 cents. My dad worked for one Frenchman for two or three months and asked him to pay him something and the man says, "I would like to pay, but I haven't got no money but you can take pigs—you can take pigs for the wages." I forget but I think six weaner pigs. We kept one sow and one boar, the rest we butchered when they grew up.

And then, what was the next step? My dad used to go out working, catch the freight train in Athabasca to go south to look for work. You had to go at least as far as Legal, or as far as Clyde, I should say. The farmers around Clyde were well off already. So, dad

used to go there harvesting every year after that. You had to walk if you missed the freight train—you walked on the railroad tracks and it took two days to get to Legal by walking and he usually slept in the hay stacks someplace in the Rochester area.

Later dad bought horses. I remember he couldn't find no horses around our area so he went to Edmonton to Strathcona and in that barn there was lots of horses for sale. He bought a nice team of black horses.

Greg What year would this have been? Roughly? Do you remember?

Nick It would have been maybe like 1931. We came in 1929 so probably after a year or so he went after those horses and he bought a nice team of black horses. He came and parked them in front of the house and says to mother, come out, I bought a goat, come and see my goat. He was joking, you know. A week or two later, he went again for horses. He was going to buy a team for his stepson. He bought him a quarter section of land. The quarters were sold, at that time, for \$10. He went to Strathcona again and bought another team of horses. This time grey Percherons. So, we had four horses and then he sent away to buy a wagon. You couldn't find any wagons, so he got one out of the Eaton's catalog, a new wagon. When it came, we had a team of horses and a wagon to go to town with. We used to come to town and the neighbors never had any horses so they all hopped on too when dad went to town.

Greg That would have been an all-day trip pretty much.

Nick Oh, a long day, as we were 20 miles from Athabasca. So, it took you three or four hours to get to Athabasca three, four hours back. That's eight hours and you would spend two or three hours in town. So, you started out in the dark and you came home in the dark, whether it was summer or winter. I remember a man made a homemade sleigh for the horses. He found a tree with a root on it that was curved, to make a runner for the sled. He brought wheat to the grain elevator and he teased my dad saying—"Here comes a streetcar." They were laughing at my dad.

Greg So did you start growing wheat then, fairly early?

Nick Well, how many acres did we have? We cleared maybe 10 acres after a few years and then we could start growing wheat and barley and oats. Yeah, we had to grow oats for green feed for the horses.

We made hay by a lake that wasn't far from our place. That lake had lots of wild grass. Yeah, actually all the neighbors made hay around that lake and of course they bought horses by that time.

Greg And all the clearing of land was all done by hand?

Nick By hand. My main job after I went to school, I was only 10 years old, was to chop brush. Dad said to make sure you chop one pile every day. So I was chopping and my

sister was piling. She was only seven. We chopped and piled every day and Dad plowed. We got land that way. I remember he let me try plowing but the handlebars were just above my head yet. I was small. It was just before that or after that, he was plowing and a rock hit that plow and those handlebars hit him in the ribs and he broke a rib, so he was complaining about that for a while.

Later on, they started building the school. The immigrants, Ukrainian immigrants and a few English immigrants that were there at the same time, they started building the school. They named the school Larvert District, named after a town in Scotland. This Scottish guy, who had the tractor, he's the one who named it. One of the neighbors, Jimmy's grandfather, was the contractor for that school. My dad had horses so he's one who skidded the logs for it out of the bush. They built the school and we started school, I think it was 1932, but not I because I was too young yet. My brother started and I think that the school had 26 children and there were enough to send for a teacher. The teacher was English, her name was Mrs. Koebke and she had an awful time with the children. None of them could speak English. When I went, a couple years later, that teacher was gone and we had another one.

Greg What grade did they go up to in the school? Do you remember?

Nick Up to grade nine. That's what I had. I finished grade eight and there was no more school for grade nine, so I had to go to Athabasca.

Greg Unless you came into town here.

Nick Yeah. So some people who had lots of money, they sent their children to Athabasca. They stayed at a rooming house.

Greg There was the Bishop Young Hostel, youth hostel in town.

Nick The Anglican Hostel. Some of them stayed there, but like Stan Byrtus, he lived across the river only three miles away from us. He said that he walked to Athabasca to school. All those people across the river, they came about the same time as us. And they were immigrants too.

Greg So did you come into town to go to high school?

Nick No. My mother says we don't have enough money to pay. And then when I finished my school, grade eight, I said to my mother, you always wanted me to be a teacher. My brother Leon says he's going to be the farmer and you will be the teacher, because, Leon is bigger than you. He's stronger, and you're small, so teacher is good for you. Ok, so when I finished school I said to mother, give me the money I want to go to be a teacher already, to school in Athabasca. But she said she had no money. Two years later, my sister was born, she was the first Canadian born here. And we walked two and a half miles to school every day. Usually bare-footed in the summertime.

Greg Do you remember when you moved from the horses to a tractor?

Nick I think I was 14 or 15 years old. I might have been even more than 15; my brother was working out already and I started working with my dad. We joined hands together and bought a tractor. Yeah, and it was a Hart-Parr tractor.

Greg Pardon me, a what tractor?

Nick It was a Hart-Parr tractor from the Oliver Company and we bought it from a farmer across the river that was already farming for quite a few years. So I remember we broke a lot of land with that tractor. It took three guys to run it, though. The steering on that tractor was so loose that you had to make one round before it would catch and then back again around before it would catch. So you were kept busy turning that wheel all the time. So my brother was driving it, and my dad was kicking the roots off from the colter so that the plough wouldn't plug, and I was walking behind stepping on the furrows so they wouldn't fall back. That's how we broke land and we broke quite a bit with it.

Nick Then later, during the war years, dad wanted to get a better tractor, a new one. So he approached International and they said they were not making tractors any more. They were making war machinery instead in those factories. So my dad met with a man from Saskatchewan who had come to Athabasca selling homemade tractors. They were called Rockols and my dad bought one. I still got it on the farm on display. During those hungry 30s, from 1929 to what was it, 1936, the Depression lasted.

Greg Or for even a bit later, actually, depending on where you were.

Nick For 10 years I think.

Greg Right up to the start of the war.

Nick So we had to go threshing down south and make enough money to live on. They only paid something like \$1 a day for threshing, which was already higher than 50 cents. For the winter the neighbors were going to make ties for the railroad. You had to hew them with a broadaxe in those days. My half-brother that's what he did every winter. But my dad said he didn't want to—I think he went one day and his back got sore so he didn't go anymore.

Greg Did the farm become more and more self-sufficient as time went on or?

Nick Yeah, you got bigger, more land, bigger and you got a lot of money from working out.

Greg So, I take it you were doing mixed farming mostly?

Nick Yeah. We bought our first cow I remember from a neighbor that was there for 10 years probably. He had cattle, so we went and bought a cow, a black cow, and we milked her for years. When my sister was born, we had milk for the baby but when the neighbor's girls (twins), same age as my sister, were born they had no cow and no milk so my mother used to give them milk from our cow.

Greg So neighbors tend to help each other out quite a bit?

Nick Yeah, yeah.

Greg So what sorts of, I mean you told me you were doing barley and oats and some wheat and then you had some pigs. Did you get into anything else? Cattle or...

Nick We got a cow and that cow had calves and so pretty soon we had a few cows. Then later on my dad bought a Holstein cow. I don't know from where. It was a milk cow, so we were going to milk cows. I remember we milked about as high as 10 cows and I had to milk three cows, my mother milked four and my dad milked three. Mother could milk better than me or dad.

Greg It was done by hand in those days.

Nick That's what we lived off of, that cream. We bought a separator and you separated the cream and you shipped the cream to the Athabasca creamery. So you had to take it by horses, horse and wagon. You got \$5 for the can of cream and that was enough to buy groceries for that week. That's what most of the farmers lived off of in those days.

Greg Do you remember when the first truck came along?

Nick Yeah. The first car that was bought in our district was by our immigrant neighbors. There was a boy, he was already 18 or 20, and he was working so he was able to buy a car. So, when they bought the car, my brother couldn't stand it because he didn't have one. He was working out so he said he had enough money to buy a truck but he's asking me to put my money together with his and we will buy a truck. So we went to see a neighbor over here about 10 miles west. He was selling his truck, a one-ton International, International Harvester Company. A good-looking truck, so we went and bought it. From our district we were the ones hauling cream for everybody on that truck to Athabasca. Harry Waschuk's family bought a small vehicle—it was like a Model T Ford that was made into a truck from a car. It was a truck that he couldn't depend on much. But when we bought our truck, we were able to go to town quite happily. People were catching rides and my brother wasn't charging anything but the neighbors said, "We are riding with you all the time so we will be paying you 50 cents from now on for each trip." So that's what they done.

Greg So, was it just like trails that were coming into town? There was no roads.

Nick Poor roads, not gravel roads. The last half mile to our place—it was crooked I remember. Oh, at one point there, the people were so poor that they went on relief. They heard that the municipality in Athabasca will pay relief to people who are poor enough.

Greg This is in the 1930s?

Nick Yeah, so, Harry Waschuk's dad, he was so poor that one time he came to our place and he was crying. My mother says to him, "Why are you crying, Jack?" He says, "The wife used the last of the flour to make bread and I don't know where I'm going to get my next sack." So, he's crying and my mother said, "Well, don't cry, I'll give you some flour." So she gave him some flour and he went back home. But then he heard about this relief. He went and applied and the government—the municipality—gave \$8 a month. And then, pretty soon another friend applied and another friend. They heard from one another and pretty soon my dad applied but he only got \$6. But the reason for that was because we had less kids. We only had four kids. The Waschuks, I think, had eight.

With that \$6 you could buy a sack of flour for \$3, and 20 pounds of rolled oats and 10 pounds of sugar and a package of salt. That was all that was needed for a farmer, the government authorities said. The next year the blueberries came so heavy that my mother was picking blueberries every day with us kids. We lived off of that and Dad went to work out for 50 cents a day. My mother picked blueberries and she made all of that, if not more. They only paid 5 cents a pound for blueberries in town, so if you picked 20 pounds, which at that time a woman could, 20 pounds times 5 cents so you got \$1 and dad only got 50 cents. I remember catching a ride with Harry Waschuk's father to sell those blueberries in Athabasca. I brought them to where they were buying them and I thought they were going to give me cash, but you had to take groceries—they wouldn't give cash and I said, well okay I'll take groceries. I want that and that and the store clerk says we haven't got it. So what do you do. Mother told me to buy some sealers so we can can some blueberries. I said I'll take sealers if you have them and they don't have any. I sold the pail of blueberries to the Chinaman at the cafe and he gave me something like 15 cents a pound and with that money I begged this store lady to give me 10 cents, I bought those sealers and I took groceries that we didn't really need.

Greg So, Nick, after the war, especially in the 1950s, did times start getting a little bit better? Did you notice anything?

Nick It was during the war that the times started getting better? Oh, yeah, that war brought prosperity to the poor around here. I don't know, probably elsewhere, too. There were more jobs. The Americans were coming to build the Alaska highway. Some guys got a job on that highway and they paid wages something like \$3 a day during the war. One guy, his name was Nick Philipzyk, he managed to buy a truck somehow and he was hauling for the Americans in Alaska with that truck, and not only that, he took moonshine too—he made moonshine. He took moonshine to sell to the Americans and he made more money than most. So he became quite prosperous. He opened up a

John Deere dealership here later and he was still making moonshine but he lost his dealership because of that. So, his boy took it over and his boy is the one that was at the John Deere dealership here lately.

Greg Do you have any recollections of things like community dances or special celebrations?

Nick Yeah, well, once we had the Larvert School the teacher made a Christmas concert every year. So, they gave the candy to the kids and then after the concert they had a dance. There was music supplied by some people who lived not too far away. There were Indians from west of Baptiste Lake that came to play—they were good musicians.

Greg It would be like a fiddle and a guitar?

Nick Fiddle and guitar mainly. When my half-brother got married, that would have been still in the 1930s I think, the neighbor said he would get the musicians. He walked across the river from our place, across the river and the ice. He knew people there who were musicians and he brought them to play at the wedding.

Greg And so, when you started farming full time, did you ever have to work out?

Nick I did, some, yeah but not that much. When I started farming there was almost enough to live on. The county was beginning to chop brush along the road and in the ditches, so I took a job chopping brush; and then lots of other farmers chopped brush. So I was getting some supplement from that. When I was young, before I was married, I worked for 12 winters in sawmills, handling lumber or falling trees. Me and my brother were good at falling trees. We would take a contract and fall for 10 cents a log. So we would average about 100 logs a day. We would get \$10, \$5 apiece. If you worked at the mill, they only paid \$4 so we thought we gained a little bit.

Greg But basically a lifetime of very hard work it sounds like.

Nick It is hard work. So, one winter, me and Harry Waschuk, we went west of Edson. They were sawing railway ties there. I thought it might be easier if I worked in lumber. We went there and the work was even harder. We packed those ties on our shoulders and they weighed at least a 100 pounds each. Boy, I remember my shoulder got a sore on it from packing those ties. So when Christmas time came, we went home and never went back.

Greg So where did you meet your spouse?

Nick Oh, we used to go to dances, different areas around Athabasca. I went one time to Colinton and that's where I met her. I was already 28 years old or 27 so I thought it's time to get married. So I got serious. We got married in her house and we had the dance in the Perryvale community center. My wife comes from Perryvale. All the girls

we had in our district all left us, went to the city, including my sister, so I had to go look for girl someplace else.

Oh, I might as well tell you this to. My dad was a Christian from the old country. He went to Bible school there. When he came to Canada, he wasn't able to meet up with any Christians, so he decided he would make some. So, he started preaching around the country and he preached all over and around Athabasca and he established a church in the Coolidge area, southwest of Athabasca. That's where we used to go to church that far, 30 miles with horses.

Greg Every Sunday?

Nick No, just maybe once a month or less. He used to go with horses preaching all over the country, and then, later on, there was another Englishman that was doing the same thing. He came to our place and asked why don't you and I preach together? He said when we come to an English family I'll preach and when we come to a Ukrainian family you preach. Dad says all right except for one thing, I got no bicycle like you have. I don't know where he got it from, somewhere, it was brand new, it came from Simpson Sears, I think. So they used to go together with bicycles later on preaching.

Greg But most of the people who were around this area, it was fairly mixed or was it like, I mean, it sounds like there's a lot of Ukrainians and a lot of English?

Nick There was all nationalities. But they said that a third of the population around Athabasca was Ukrainian and two thirds was something else. There wasn't that many English. A lot of them were French, Irish, and Scotch. Like out in our direction there was only that Howard Stafford. He was English and he came to that area something like maybe 15 years earlier than we did. They were already established, so my dad used to work for them. Kenny Stafford, he's still there, he's got the feed lot there. But now he wants to sell. He's got enough land there and a feed lot and he wants \$8,000,000 I heard.

Greg And so if you were thinking about the changes that you've seen in this area over the last 50 or 60 years or more. Is there anything that really strikes you?

Nick Well, there was changes as the years went by, from the Depression years where people were so poor that my mother used to cry but as the years went by, we got richer and richer and richer. We weren't rich or anything like that but we were getting richer. When we got the tractor, then we quit using the horses so much and at one point the alfalfa started growing good in that area. They bought the seed from us and they paid something like 50 cents a pound. So my dad got rich overnight. He had five acres of wheat, no, he had five acres of this alfalfa and we threshed it and got a \$1,000 out of the seed. So that was big money for them farmers in those days. So, he seeded 20 more acres and he got \$2,000 or \$3,000 the next year. Then he bought a new threshing machine and the Sirocco tractor and we were well-off, we weren't suffering.

Now I gave my farm over to my boy; sold it to him cheap like, you know, and he is expanding way bigger than me. The machinery I left him wasn't good enough so he's buying bigger machines and newer. What I left him he doesn't appreciate that much, but he's getting better. He had a tremendous amount of canola last two or three years. They paid \$10 a bushel for canola and if you get 40 bushels today like he did last year, that's \$400 a bushel an acre. If you have 1,000 acres, how much does that give you? Big money—but it costs lots to put it in though because the government, or whoever made the deal, you can't seed your own seed. If they catch you doing it, they put you in jail so you have to buy the seeds from them and they charge something like \$10 a pound for the seed. You sell it for \$10 a bushel and they charge you \$10 a pound for buying it from them but the boy does it and he says it still pays.

Greg So is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

Nick Uh, well, I went to the old country. It was an interesting trip for me to see my relatives there and my half-sister. See, my half-brother came with my dad to Canada, but he left his sister behind in Ukraine, she was married there already. So, I went to see her in 1988 and she showed me the house where I was born. It was interesting. She had a new house for maybe the third time and she had four girls and one boy. I visited with the girls; a day with each girl or maybe a little more because I stayed in the hotel for the night, just went to see them in the daytime. They all wanted to come to Canada and I thought to myself, well maybe I could afford to bring one but not all of them so I didn't bring none of them.

Greg How are they doing now?

Nick They're still okay. They weren't really suffering there when I was there. The jobs were scarce there too like they are here and some of the jobs—one of the nieces was working in a dairy and said they don't pay her no wages but she says she still goes to work there anyway and she brings cream home, so that's better than nothing.

I wrote something here that I didn't say, I think.

Greg Okay, what's that?

Nick Well, I was going to school and there was no road to the school when they first built it. There was a creek that we had to cross and at flood time, in the spring, the creek got so high that it took the bridge away. There was a tree that fell down across the creek, so we had to cross the creek on the tree. It was dangerous for a kid; you could fall into the creek and that's it.

Greg I am going to assume schooling was very heavily oriented towards English and Anglo?

Nick Everything was in English, yeah. But we still spoke Ukrainian because we didn't know how to speak English and the teachers once in a while would bawl us out and say "Why don't you speak English, you will learn it faster."

My kids are all married now. Maybe you want to know about them. When I got married, we had five kids. Four girls and one boy. The oldest girl married a man she met him in Edmonton, I think. She was working as a bank teller and she met this customer and he married her. The second girl, she was going to school here in Athabasca, and one of the boys in her grade or a grade older, she married him after she finished school. The third one is married to a man she met in Edmonton. He works for John Deere and his name is Johnson, like yours. He's still there. He's probably second in command there in John Deere already. My youngest daughter met a boy in Edmonton, too, and she married him and they have three kids. My boy met a girl in Athabasca and she already had a baby and they had two more children.

Greg And he's the only one who stayed behind.

Nick Yeah. Well, he wasn't too good in school. The girls were pretty good, but not him, so he wanted to farm. He was more mechanically inclined. The girls were interested in horses but not him he wanted a quad.

Greg One question here that's kind of interesting is what advice would you give to your grandchildren's generation?

Nick Oh, well, in my opinion, my folks were Christians and they taught us how to be good Christians and as far as they were concerned, that was the only way to live, the Christian way. I preached that to my kids and they're all Christian and I say the same thing to the grandchildren. Two of them went to Bible School in Edmonton and the two girls married preachers so it's rubbing off on the kids pretty good from me, you see.

Nick That's about all, yeah.

Greg Okay, well, thank you very much.

[End of Interview]

Machine transcribed by: trint.com

Edited by: Gregory Johnson Proof-read by: Lois Schinkinger

January, 2022