

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
Transcription of Vera McConaghy recording 2017.mp3
http://digiport.athabasca.ca/aasmp/people/v_mcconaghy.htm

Narrator: Vera McConaghy
Interviewers: Dawn Burgess and Gordon Willis
February 23, 2017

[Start of Interview]

Dawn This is Dawn Burgess interviewing my grandmother in February, 2017. Let's start by telling me what year you were born and where.

Vera I was born in 1917 in the old town of Slave Lake called Sawridge. My maiden name was Vera Alena Duval.

Dawn Where were your parents from?

Vera My parents had moved to Sawridge from Athabasca. And before Athabasca, they had come from the States someplace. But we didn't live in Sawridge very long. I think I was three months old when we left there. We moved from town to town to town. My dad was always on the move and we finally ended up back in Athabasca when I was 11 years old in 1929. The first thing I remember going into Athabasca was that big United Church. I thought it was such a beautiful church and it is. I think it's older than I am.

Dawn/Vera Is that the big building on the top of the hill?

Vera Yeah, it's on a hill.

Dawn Is that the one that Dad goes to now?

Vera Yes. Someday I'll go with him. Athabasca wasn't so very big. It was called Athabasca Landing because that's where the boats and scows used to land years ago and they always called it Athabasca Landing.

Dawn/Vera Dad said that Grandpa Duval made boats when you were at Athabasca Landing? / No.

Dawn Dad asked me to ask about that because he thought that he had heard that he built some of the skiffs that would go down the river.

Vera No, to tell you the truth, I don't know what my dad did, just odd jobs. Before we went to Athabasca we lived in Blackfalds and then we lived in Lacombe. He bought a rooming house in Lacombe just to rent out rooms. Every room had a chamber pot under the bed or in a commode, because there were no bathrooms or anything in them days. And I can't remember where we went after that. So many different places. But when we finally ended up in Athabasca, we were there.

Vera We moved out on a farm for a while in the Forest (or Forfar?) district. Anyway, Cassie and I went to school there for a year and then they moved back into town. I don't remember what we did for a while. And when I was old enough, I left home. I didn't go to school very long because we moved so much and I wasn't that good in school. I didn't get a very good education.

Dawn What grade do you think you got up to?

Vera I went to Grade 7. Schools were a lot different than what they are now. Anyhow, I went out and done housework in different places. In those hard times, and, believe me, they were hard times, a girl got \$5.00 a month for doing housework. I remember milking cows and feeding pigs as well doing housework for \$5.00 a month.

Dawn Who did you work for?

Vera Wherever. I got work in different places.

I was so tight with my money. I didn't spend it. Believe me, that \$5.00 was big to me. If I got a new pair of shoes, which I could get real nice ones in the catalog for \$2.00 or \$2.50, I really took care of them. Because times were pretty tough then.

And then I went to visit my sister in Busby, and that's where I met Doug McConaghy. We were married when I was 18. We lived on a farm that was four miles out of Busby for about a year. Then we moved to Athabasca. Doug got jobs in the garage, and then they sent him for a mechanic course. So, he worked in the garages and then he got a job out at Spurfield at the mill there doing different things—mechanical work and going out to the camps. They had different camps for cutting logs and stuff and bringing it in. The logs were sawed at the mill in Spurfield. Spurfield was four miles off the highway. So if it rained, we'd done a lot of walking.

Dawn How many kids were born in Spurfield?

Vera When we lived in Spurfield, I had Jenny and Danny. And then we moved to Smith to the mill here. Then I had Tracy and Dean. Life wasn't always easy.

Dawn How many children did you have in total?

Vera I forgot to mention my children.

Dawn (Laughs.) Well, you mentioned the four babies.

Vera Well, Darlene was born in March of 1937.

Dawn Where was she born?

Vera Darlene was born in Edmonton. The others, Billy, Freddy, and Karen, were born in Athabasca. Jimmy was born in Lac La Biche, and Noni was born in Athabasca. We moved to Spurfield when she was three.

Dawn Did they go to school in Spurfield?

Vera There was a little school in Spurfield. It was an old army hut and very cold. Then they built a new one-room school.

Dawn Tell me the story about how sometimes you and Grandpa would get to Smith.

Dawn/Vera Do you mean from Spurfield? Yeah.

Vera Well, we had a car, so we just drove in. There were times when it rained that a couple of places got pretty bad. If it rained too hard, you left your car there and walked because you would get stuck.

Dawn And how far was the walk?

Vera Oh, two or three miles to the track and then down the track a ways into Spurfield.

Dawn Did you ever ride the train?

Vera Oh, yes. There was a weigh freight that went through about six o'clock in the evening. They always had a car on there for a traveling coach. And then they took that off, so we just rode on a flat car. One time when my sister was out visiting, I told her I'd take her 'hoboing' on the train. So we stood in front of a tanker and hung on the railings and ladders. We hung on to that and rode into Smith. And she said, "Oh, I hope it doesn't stop on the bridge." And sure enough, it stopped on the bridge. I said, "Well, just don't look down." And then we came back on the train. I think it left at ten o'clock, all the coaches. It was going up to Peace River or someplace but we'd ride back to Spurfield. I think it cost 20 cents or something like that. It stopped at Spurfield, so it was quite an experience. But I wouldn't want my kids to do it now.

Dawn Did you have power in Spurfield?

Vera They had a big generator and a few places had power. Power was in a couple of different houses, but they shut that off at 10 o'clock at night. When we moved there, I had an electric washing machine that ran on electricity, but it didn't come on until a certain time in the day and then it was off at 10:00. So it kept me busy trying to get washing done. And then we built a motor for the machine.

Dawn Can you tell me about when you were living in Athabasca? You told me a story once about your lunch. Great grandma would pack a lunch for you and Auntie Cassie?

Vera Oh, that's when we went to the Parkhurst school district when we lived out on the farm when we first went there. We lived about a mile from the school. Mom would pack our lunch in lard pails. Cassie had a five-pound lard pail and I had a three-pound lard pail. Mom made our lunch with homemade bread, of course, and lard and brown sugar because we had no butter. She would fill the pails to the top. Usually, Cassie ate all of hers and then go into mine. We carried milk home. We'd go

the long way home up the road and stop at Koerner's place, and they'd put milk in our lard pails and we'd take milk home from the neighbors.

Dawn That's a nice memory. And did you ever go to dances when you were young?

Vera We never missed a dance if there was a dance in the old schools. I remember when we went to the Parkhurst school. There was always a dance for something. There would be a fiddle and a guitar, that's all there was. Our teacher that year put on a box social and a dance to make money so she could buy us a Christmas present.

A box social was when the women all packed a lunch box, like in a shoe box or something, and then they raffled these off to the men. The men didn't know whose lunch box it was. But if they figured out it was somebody that they liked, they would pay a little more. I don't think anybody paid any more than \$4.00 or \$5.00 because nobody could afford it. The money raised was for the kids, for school, for Christmas presents. I remember she sent from the catalog and got us all a little zippered case with books, crayons, scribblers, pencils and a whole bunch of stuff. We just thought that was so great.

Dawn What was her name? Do you remember?

Vera Her name was Annie Millen. It was her brother who was a policeman that was shot when that trapper was on the loose. The trapper had killed somebody and then he killed that policeman. It was her brother.

Dawn/Vera When was that? / That was in 1930 maybe.

Dawn/Vera In this area? / It happened way up north someplace.

Dawn Was that the only present you would get?

Vera If we got one thing, we were so happy and we appreciated what we got. I don't think kids do anymore.

Dawn No, they don't. I agree. Aunt Cassie stayed in Athabasca, didn't she?

Vera Yes, she lived in Athabasca. My sister Cassie—she worked in the hospital for a while. And then she married Jim Rogers. She had a daughter, Heather.

My dad died in 1941. My mother married Harry Overholt in 1942.

Dawn Where was he from?

Vera He lived across the river in the Sawdy district. They lived there for a while and then they moved to BC.

Dawn So most of your children didn't know Grandpa Duval. They didn't get to meet him.

Vera No, Billy was one year old when my dad died.

Dawn Was he sick?

Vera He had stomach cancer. He was 76, I think. But those were hard times.

Dawn Tell me about your siblings.

Vera I remember my brother Mike when I was about five years old. I think the last time I saw him was in Edson. I can just remember him. And then I never saw him again till I was 50 when my mom died.

Dawn Why? Where did he go?

Vera He was in the States. And I don't know, he just never came back. And then there were years when I never saw my brother Cliff either. He was in BC, but he'd come home once in a while.

Vera My sister Cassie and I were close because she was always around home. She married Jim Rogers and they moved to BC for a while. And then they looked after mom.

Dawn What about Aunt Flo?

Vera My sister Florence married Dave Smith from Saskatchewan, and they lived there for a while and then they moved to Penticton, BC. I didn't see too much of her except when I'd go out to visit Mom. Cassie and Jim lived there in BC, looking after mom and Harry. Then, after mom died, they moved to Athabasca. They were just there a short while when Cassie had a heart attack and died. My sister Flo died in 1974. My sister Cassie died in 1976. My husband died in 1977. Three in a row. Then after he died, I stayed right here where I still am, up on the hill across the river from Smith.

Dawn How long have you lived in this house?

Vera This house was down in the mill yard and we had it pulled up here on the acreage in 1968.

Dawn/Vera You lived right in the mill yard? / Yes.

Dawn How was that?

Vera Well, it wasn't bad. We were just back a bit, but it was alright. But I love it up here.

Dawn I heard that Dean used to have fun with all of the equipment operators when you lived in the mill yard. Dad said that Dean used to play in the mill yard and ride with all of the equipment operators when he was young.

Vera I don't know.

Dawn Maybe you didn't know about it.

Vera No, I don't know.

Dawn/Vera And when you had your children, were they all born in a hospital? / Yes.

Dawn And back then, how long did you get to stay in a hospital?

Vera When you had a baby in them days, you stayed there in bed for at least nine days. And on the 10th day they let you sit up on a chair while they changed the beds and things, and then you'd go home on the 11th day, feeling so weak. When Danny was born it was the first time that I was able to get up out of bed on the third day. But I was sick and I had to have blood transfusions. But anyway, I got home within a week. But when Tracy was born, I had to have blood transfusions. And, I was there a little longer in the hospital.

[Start of Gordon Willis as Interviewer]

Gordon My name is Gordon Willis. This is February 23, 2017. You didn't mention Doug—he used to drive a bus, right?

Vera Yeah, a passenger bus from Edmonton called Canadian Coachways. But I never mentioned being married or anything yet.

Gordon How many years did your husband drive the bus?

Vera Doug drove the Canadian Coachways bus for about four years. And then he worked in Slim Nelson's garage.

Gordon So you talked about Spurfield and places like that?

Vera We moved to Spurfield in 1948. We lived there for five years. But I think I told her all that.

Gordon After you moved to Smith, you belonged to quite a few different clubs, didn't you?

Vera Yeah, we moved to Smith in 1954 where Doug worked at the mill and we lived in the mill yard.

Gordon Who owned the mill yard then?

Vera Stelter Mills, Reinhard Stelter.

Gordon Did Doug work there until he retired?

Vera Yes, Doug worked there for a few years as a mechanic. And then we moved our house up the hill and across the river. We had to move it all the way around by

Mitsue because it wouldn't cross the bridge. Gordie Willis drove the truck to bring it around. We lived here about nine years before Doug died in 1977.

Gordon Did you belong to different clubs?

Vera Well, I have my life membership with the Ladies Auxiliary of the Legion. And of course, we go to the Seniors Drop-In Center.

Gordon And you've been involved with Gentle Ben?

Vera Yes, we have a Gentle Ben Care Society for older people. It's a good thing for a little town. We can hire a driver to go to wherever we need to go in Athabasca, Slave Lake, Westlock, or to the city. We pay a certain amount and Gentle Ben pays the rest. We also have it for house cleaning. I have a housekeeper that comes in every two weeks. It's just a great thing for our town because I don't think any of the neighboring towns have it.

Gordon Do you still go to card parties?

Vera We used to have card parties. They still do in the Center. Years ago, before Doug passed away, we went to lots of card parties when there wasn't so much TV. We had card parties every Sunday night at one place or another. We'd have four or five tables. And there was four or five families that we went to every Sunday night. And that was great then. Now, there's no time for anything like that, but the Seniors' Drop-In Center have cards just once a month. They go from Slave Lake all the way up to High Prairie in the winter time. Otherwise, our little town is very slow, but we're thankful for those things.

Gordon Did you go to the suppers and jam sessions at the Seniors' Center?

Vera The Drop-In Center has a supper once a month on the last Saturday of the month. We have jam sessions. They come to play from all over the place: Slave Lake, Athabasca, and we've had musicians come from way on the other side of Slave Lake from all over. Of course, all the musicians get a free supper. It's a good night because even though we paid \$10.00 for supper, we have all that music to listen to. They come about 3:00 because they like to practice.

Gordon So when you first started the interview, did you talk about your teacher and her brother being a policeman that was shot? Do you remember the name of the trapper?

Vera The trapper that I talked about before was Albert Johnson. I think this was in the 30s. That's going back a long way.

Gordon Was he called the Mad Trapper of Rat River?

Vera Yes, he was called the Mad Trapper but I can't remember what he done to cause all this.

Gordon When you had your house moved up here, I was the one that hauled it. It was Butch and I, and Leo Letourneau. Could you just add that in there? It was Butch and I that moved it. Leo was the pilot car. Do you remember that he was drunk when we got here? Remember that?

Vera Going back to when we moved the house, Gordie Willis, my son-in-law, drove the truck and Butch Grayling also helped with the move from the mill. Leo Letourneau was the pilot man, driving by himself. He was pretty well plastered by the time he got to where the house was to be, but he was having a good time.

Anyway, we've lived up here for 48 years. It'll be 49 this summer. And I just love it up here. Doug passed away in 1977 and I've stayed right here because I've got good kids to help me. My daughter, Noni, brings down something for me to eat. She has to cook anyway, so she brings a plate down every day. My grandson lives in the same yard. The place belongs to him now. So, they cut my grass and do a lot of things for me, so I'm still able to live in my house alone, which I'm very thankful for.

Gordon Are you still pretty active?

Vera I did a lot of traveling starting in my 70s and 80s. I went to Australia with my granddaughter in 1985. I have a niece living there and we were there for four months. And then I went back to Australia in 1994 by myself and stayed for two months. And then Gwen Wolstonholme and I traveled together. We took a bus trip every year. We'd wait for the brochure to come so we could pick out a place to go. And we really enjoyed that. I travelled until I was 85. But now, I just like to stay home.

Gordon Do you still like to walk?

Vera I go down to our new hall. And it's open for walking on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. So, I go down there because there's a walker there and I walk, which is good for me because now I am 99 years old and I'm still enjoying my life. I like living alone here and having company and the kids come home. It's nice to have them.

Gordon Well, that's pretty good.

Vera I was thinking the other day. I was laying there with my eyes closed for hours, just resting my eyes, and I was thinking of what I should say in this interview. I had a long, long story. And then, when I go to say it, I can't think of anything.

Gordon Well, I think you did well.

[End of Interview]

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