INTERVIEWER: Dianne Zieman

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INTERVIEW:

Mr. Burt Willars, of 26 Mary Street, New Liskard, phone: 647-4526, was born in Leicester, England, seventy-four years ago. He is married, but I didn't interview his wife, although she did make a few remarks about her teaching career at one of the area schools.

Origin

His mother brought him out from England when he was four years old; his father had come up to the Temiskaming district the year before. In England, there was a good deal of advertising for settlers to come to Canada and his father tossed between emigrating to Australia or Canada. When his father arrived in Montreal, he saw a fresh advertisement for this locale and so he came up here. Possibly, his father saw one of C.C. Farr's pamphlets, as Farr published an advertisement on the area, which he even sent to England.

His parents had arranged to meet in Mattawa when she first arrived in Canada with their four children. However, she missed meeting her husband, and so, took the boat up the lake without waiting for him. They landed at Sharpe's Bay and were met by Charlie McNaughton, who had a horse and a stone-boat - no wagons. Anyhow, wagons couldn't have gone over that road! Charlie took their luggage, and his mother carried the baby, while the three kids walked beside her, eight miles north of here through the bush along a trail to the end of the line.

His father was still in Mattawa - her mother thought she was left for life in the wilderness with four small kids. They never would have left home if they had been afraid of things. It took his father three days to catch up with them - it was a day's trip up the lake.

Early home:

The family settled on a farm about eight miles out at an area known as McNaughton's Corner. His parents stayed there until they were burned out in the 1922 fire, as were all their neighbours.

He has a picture of the first house his parents occupied on the McDougall property. It was a log cabin, and they got their water from a dug well, and a spring also on their land.

Well drilling:

In the hot weather in the summer, farmers for miles around used to draw water in barrels. Later on, when the area opened up, wells were drilled and everybody had plenty of water.

The outfit that they used to drill wells had a weight on a cable, which went down the pipe and they would keep adding water. They pounded and souped up the stuff until they could drive it down where it hit the rock bed. Usually, there was a seam of water between the rock bed and the soil. In rocky areas, they would haveto use the rock-drilling rigs to penetrate the rocks and provide water.

Youth:

Cannot remember too much about growing up. They cleared land as they could; didn't have horses at the start. They planted crops as fodder for the animals and food for themselves.

When he was 17, he went overseas in the first World War, and when he came home, he had grown up.

Education:

He attended school at Hanbury, which was two and a half miles from home, about six miles from New Liskeard. There were no buses then - they plowed their own tracks. At his school, there was a nominal role of about sixty, but all of the children would not attend every day due to walking conditions and that sort of thing. Even if they all showed up one day, there was only one teacher for the grades 1 to 4 (now grades 1 to 8).

Mrs. Willars taught at Hanbury School in later years. The kids bought their own slates and supplies for themselves. A lot of their work was done on the slate, then they wiped it off for another lesson.

They couldn't have a Kindergarten class then because the small kids could never walk that far. Mr. Willars remembered Marge, his sister, sitting on the snow and howling on the walk to school - he didn't know what to do with her - couldn't pound her and couldn't just leave her there!

Lumbering:

He worked since age twelve, on a farm, or in the bush - wherever he could get work. There were different lumber companies - Booth's was a little before his time, although he knows that they timbered along the White River and the "cricks" flowing into the river for years. A lot of their supplies were taken into them by horse from New Liskeard up into what is now Belle Vallee. Pearson was the post office at that time.

At this time of the year (early spring - breakup), the loggers would be on the drive, and would spend summer on the farm. Most of the farmers went into the bush in the winter as there was nothing for them to do on the farm. Most of them took the timber off their own lots.

He worked in all the sawmills around where there was work.

McLennan was one of the lumber jacks in the Latchford area.

Entertainment:

Life was a recreation. They played soccer and baseball. Hunting was a way of life, so they could get their meat. Today, his grandchild considers hunting as recreation - they shot to provide their families with food. There was a game warden in the area, Mr. Tom Chester, the father of the present Reg Chester. However, there weren't too many game wardens and the rules could be bent a little. There were specified hunting seasons - deer, moose. No fishing - they were eight miles from New Liskeard and six miles from the nearest water. Consequently, all the people who were raised with him could neither swim nor skate.

People on the farms really socialized. Square dancing was one of the first communal activities - they used the schools for dances and various get-togethers, or at one of the homes. The schools belonged to the people in those days. There were churches in the communities, but they had to rely on the New Liskeard clergy to conduct the services. The preachers would snowshoe over to hold the services. They even had the bishop stay at their house over night when he was holding a local confirmation ceremony.

Settlers:

Originally, there was quite a group of English settlers - Loach, Males, Goddard, Arnold, Bowering, Stewards, McEwan families. Other than that, McCooey, Alderdice, Hilltz, Emmerson, Fowler families. These were all in Harley Township, except for the Males, who were a little further down on the way to New Liskeard.

Employment:

He worked on a farm for ten hours a day, six days a week for 75¢ a day. He would pay his mother $3 a week for room and board and would have $1.50 for himself. That was the summer he was twelve, but that was a man's wages. In the woods, the wages were from $15 a month with room and board up to $35 a month. Immediately after W.W.1, the wages approached $110 a month, at least he got that for working for Bill Goddard.

After the war, he stayed in the north. Where one industry was taperig off, another was building up. Wasn't so much lumbering then, they had to go a little further back to get timber. The farms were almost cleared by that time - he presumes they were making money. The farmer who was willing to work is still there - same families on the farms. They are doing all right. There was no such things as subsidizing farmers - nothing of welfare then. People worked for what they got - if they didn't work, they starved. Mr. Willars feels it should most definitely be that way still!

Transportation:

Walking; wagons would have to be shipped by boat up until about 1905 when the railway was put through. The original horses came in on the boat from Mattawa, or some were walked up the right of way from North Bay.

The railway came in to New Liskeard on the first of July, 1905. It came to Cobalt in 1904. For months prior to that, the Indians came through - some walked as far as 1,500 miles in order to see the train. How did they know! Must have been a very effective moccassin telegraph.

Indians: doesn't know the name of the tribes over at North Tem. There were Algonquins at Temagami and Crees, Ojibways at Moosonee.

Mr. Willars doesn't remember the streetcar. The route pretty well followed along the highway between here and Cobalt - 11B. Montgomery was one of the conductors and so was Macmillan. He never used the streetcar very much, as they would go to New Liskeard to shop. The first time he was ever in Haileybury was when he was 17 years old and went to get his army pay.

Fires:

Porqupine fire in 1910; Matheson Fire in 1916 - a lot of people lost their lives and homes. Haileybury Fire in 1922 - fires were known by where they occurred, although they would spread over quite an area.

In Haileybury, the people went into the lake; at Porqupine, they did the same. In Matheson, they would go into root cellars if there was no water available. Some suffocated right there. If a fire comes along, you do what you can think of at the time.

New Liskeard:

This was the closest centre to which they came for any supplies. Greenwood's, Robinson's, Grill's were across the river. Murray and McKnights= there were a lot of stores, but he doesn't remember them all. Ravia Bros. were along the river - they were in opposition to Hudson Bay Co., but should check with someone who was around town at that time.

Officials:

There were lawyers in early New Liskeard; if there's money flowing out of the country, the lawyers will be there. Any organized town or township appointed a police officer; only in later years have we found that it takes seven people to drive around here in their cars.

There were other law officials even when the Willars first came here. Crown Land Agent would have been a law enforcement official if it was necessary. Mr. Chester - game warden; Rube McCrea - a Crown Land Agent; John Grills was the original Land Agent (Note: on the basis of other interviews and research, believe it was John Armstrong who was the original Land Agent; Grills was an early settler.)

Medical Facilities:

The doctors of the area went everywhere to see the ill in all types of weather, and at any time. They killed themselves curing people - you had to be really ill or you wouldn't call them.

Dr. MacNaughton, Dr. McCullough (two of them), Dr. Fisher - these doctors would let their horses go home and they would sleep in the wagon - the horses would find their own way home - it was the only way for the over-worked doctors to get some sleep.

Dr. Fisher was the one who had the Fisher Block, which used to be on the other side of the shore down on the riverbank. Dr. Young was here. He remembers his mother giving Dr. J.S. McCullough hell because he did not pass her son for the army.

There were other doctors over the years, but he doesn't remember all the names - the ones he mentioned looked after his family.

Dr. MacNaughton used to keep race horses. "Admiral Togo" was one. "Togo" was named after the Russian-Japanese War in 1902; these race horses were only used as drivers for transportation - never for racing. The doctor was a pretty strict-living man!

There was a bad typhoid epidemic in the early days. Dr. Fisher attended. All those who were not sick helped out. He vaccinated people with a sharp bone and rubbed the vaccine into the arm.

Mrs. Groom wrote about the pesthouses for quarantine purposes in her book, "The Melting Years". The plan of pesthouses to isolate the germ has been used throughout the world when anything like that comes along; couldn't let a typhoid victim in a hospital ward with out sufficient isolation precuations.

When the women had their babies, they would call a neighbour woman to act as midwives.

TODAY:

Educational facilities: Feels that if education had been handled as a business over the years, the business would have been bankrupt a long time ago.

They build new schools, and a couple of years later, they discard them. Doesn't think much of the area schools, when they bus the kids in from miles and miles. It costs!

The teachers don't seem to do a day's work - they crab a lot. In some cases in the high school, they are not capable teachers.

Small schools are better for grade school. Kids become more self-reliant than those in a larger school. They learn to study better as they don't just have the work shoved at them.

Economic situation: As good as it is anywhere else in the country, yet Northeastern Ontario may be designated as a poor area by the government. He would think that this area would follow the economy of the whole country. Sudbury is one of the busiest cities in the country and yet they are still crabbing. Cutbacks.

Job opportunities, training and wages:

Depends on what you are looking for - whether there's specialization or what. There again, it depends upon the economic situation as a whole. If you want to work, you will get a job somewhere. You might not make as much as you feel you should, but you can get by.

Many incidents of welfare abuses.

The training here is as good as anywhere else. Nothing wrong with our schools. Retraining has gone to larger centres, eg. Timmins. Three or four years ago, it was in Cobalt. He doesn't think it is wise to set up another centre here - it costs too much to have a little place to retrain only about three people. At times, there is a lack of tradesmen in the area. A little town like this would certainly not have enough jobs to justify a lot of retraining in one field.

Re wages: He hasn't heard anything about the rate of wages. Pretty hard to make comparisons. Gold miners are supposed to be paid less than nickel miners, yet the Dome Mine hasn't had a strike since 1909.

City facilities:

Would think that this area is well ahead of any place of the same size particularly since they opened up the new arena. There's lots to do here - it's not necessary for all those boys to be standing on the bank corner for hours in the afternoon.

Private enterprise:

A good area as everyone who has set up a business so far seems to be doing well. Can't see anything wrong with the place at all.

He was never out of work a day in his life - worked for the L.C.B.O for thrirty-five years before he was retired.

Mr. Willars can see no trend in take-overs. If an owner wants to sell out, he does, but no-one comes in and forces him to give up his business. Eplett's were bought out by Weston's. Wabi, which was originally owned by a group of local men, sold to an English outfit.

Changes:

Most noticeable - motor cars and improved roads.

The town opened up in 1905, when the railroad came in. Had there been nothing else, it would have progressed for a hundred years pretty much at the same rate. The inception of cars and the opening of a road to this area, plus the electronics era have done a lot. Northern Telephone is doing extremely well these past twenty years in comparison to its first years.

Transportation methods are perhaps the best way of opening up a country and this would apply all over the world. Distances don't really matter - not the same world any longer.

There are two parks on the town's long-term plan, so we must be doing all right.

Regarding any suggestions for future changes, he feels that at a different age, he may have had other ideas. Quite satisfied now.