

Westman Oral History collection

Interview Date:	1981-10-27
Narrator (interviewee):	Elmer A. Travis
Interviewer:	John E. Forsyth
Location:	City, Province
Transcriber:	Jaclyn Matchullis
Date Transcribed:	2014-09-30
Recording Format:	Cassette
Length of Recording:	00:29:00

00:00:00-00:00:05- Silence

Question: Today is October 27th, 1981. The following is an interview with Elmer Travis at his home in Souris, Manitoba. He ah is a retired farmer and has done many other things in his long and interesting life. The interview is conducted today by John Forsythe for the Westman Oral History Association project, Voices of Yesteryear. Could you tell us first Elmer where your family came from and why they came to Manitoba?

Answer: Um from, ah, the United States, ah, state of North Dakota

Q: And what was your nearest town down there?

A: Rolla. Rolla was our town, town and we farmed east of Rolla 16 miles away and anyway um Dad and some of the, um, the surrounding neighbours decided they'd like to move to Canada more range for rai... cattle raising and ah soon ya know and they had no ah wood around there they had, ah, go for 25 miles to get wood ah so was quite the ah problem. And some people come up here and seen the, ah, country in Canada and they were they were quite shocked with it. These got together and come up here and homesteaded. So on.

Q: What year was that?

A: That be 19 ah eight, but we never moved up 19 five.

Q: And you were?

A: I was 5 years old.

Q: Where did you ah settle when you...

A: Settled?

Q: Yeah.

A: Um ah North of Roblin, Manitoba. About ah oh I'd say roughly 18 miles. That'd be up in what we call the present time [San Clara?] District.

Q: Your nearest town would be?

A: Well we used to use Togo, Saskatchewan just over the border as it was the nearest and sometimes we ah shipped our grain over Microft, Manitoba.

Q: How did your dad, ah, the home, homesteads were still open at the time...

A: Oh yes! Oh yes!

Q: So, he was able to get a homestead?

A: Oh yeah there was quite a few of them but you had to go further North, as your imagining they picked up you know.

Q: Did you remember you ah Section Township and Range up there?

A: (inhale of breath) That's slipped of my mind John. I never thought of that.

Q: We'll get that again.

A: Yeah.

Q: Ah how many were there in your family?

A: At the time ah there'd be roughly about seven.

Q: Seven boys and girls?

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: How big a farm did you have to ...

A: Well, Dad, Dad started out with just a quarter section you know. Eventually ended up with five section and quarter.

Q: So you were, had to clear some land.

A: Oh yeah! We had to do it the hard way with the old axe and the [unclear] and what not and break it up with horses. I guess every farmer in the district did the same thing yeah. The old method.

Q: But there wou... ah there would be some open land up there too.

A: Oh yeah! There was open land sure! But ah we had to take the bush along with the open there was no ah I don't recall any land that you could take say take a quarter and its was all prairie.

Q: I suppose you're, you're close enough so that your family could move just by wagon.

A: Oh yeah! That the only way of travel in those days. The old prairie trails (chuckle). Through ravines and ah creeks and water (chuckle). But it was the way of life right across the prairie, I presume.

Q: And I guess there was a country school built there.

A: The which?

Q: A country school.

A: Oh yeah! We [unclear] built if I remember right in 19 eight the school started. They started to build in seven and they get it built in 19 eight.

Q: Just in time to start you.

A: Yeah and that were I took all my school in a little country school called Walker School and it was quite a school. Use take as high as, be as high as 60 children come to the school to one teacher. I don't know how they done it! [Chuckle]. Oh! It's it's hard to believe you know. Ah a lot of people moved up there.

You know. It was an opening country lot of them moved outta there and lot of them stayed. Ah some of them looked for better grounds as you might say. I turned out alright. It's quite a country up there. Ah.

There's a mix to farming country more or less. Everybody could cattle and so forth.

Q: That school would go to grade eight, when you were in there?

A: How's that John?

Q: The school would go to grade eight?

A: My school would go to grade eight , that's right. Yep and then we had anybody who wanted to take higher school would have to go on to the the ah ah the town of Roblin's high schooling.

Q: What did you grow there mostly?

A: Oh we we grew in the first years mostly, um, oats and barely we didn't go in for too much wheat because, ah, we grew, ah, something that we could feed the stock with. More Dad more, more or less was into stock raising. Ah, wheat was kind of a touchy thing because it was open new country and, ah, get frost sometimes right around the early side.

Q: Were there enough logs there to build log houses?

A: Oh there was a lot a lot of timber. Oh yeah! We all had log houses. Oh yeah! Nobody had a frame house up there for, oh, we got away in, ah, teens I would say, oh yeah! There a lot of log houses in those days and most of them sod covered. Didn't have the shingles on them, they was sod covered. Some, there was the odd one was able to make a few shakes to fit. You know what the old shakes were? Some of them knew how to build them they were just poplar wood but some of them did. But of course [rustling] so got ahead and eventually built better houses, same applied all over I guess no matter where you go. [Rustling].

Q: What about these social life in that community Elmer?

A: Well in those days people just had to get between themselves form some bit of social life which was ah quite interesting at times we used to have sometimes ah house parties and other times when we got to have the school's well use to be able to get a school for some social times you has and ah it became quite a thing it got the people together more so we you know and people got acquainted more so it became very much more sociable. And of course ah I was ah one that kind of played around with music a bit and ah...

Q: Where'd you get that? What musical training do you get?

A: Training? I didn't have too much I, ah, one time I got five lessons on the organ from the school marm and from there I transferred it to the violin and picked it up there. I was, I and the wife used to play for, through the parties, I did the fiddling and she did the accordion so it was quite interesting and ah part of social life because very good out here in the district. We all enjoyed it. It brought people together more.

Q: You kept up your musical interest over the years and ah now I believe you can try to put with your fiddle and guitar on tape Elmer.

A: Oh you want me to describe it a little?

Q: Yes.

A: Ah well later years when the ah the more up to date music ah came out why we was able to pick up tapes so I got monkeying around with the tapes eventually I figured out to put two tapes together to play replay my tapes of music and put a blank in the other one and I took the guitar and recorded and it came out all together the recording and the music and that's what we want to run a little piece of now then?

Q: Yes If you could might run that and just tell us a little bit about the ah the ah tune at the same time

A: Okay.

10:00:00 - music starts

Q: What piece is that Elmer?

A: That's ah ah a piece called "Coming Home to Chloe". An old timer. Used to be played over the [unclear] from Chicago years ago in the early radio.

Q: While I guess this socializing ah eventually lead to marriage...

A: Yes.

Q: ...Elmer.

A: Yes. Right one thing leads to another

Q: [Chuckling] And so ah you, ah, married Mary when you were 21. What was her name?

A: Mary Louise Lafournaise.

Q: And she also came from?

A: From North Dakota. Yep. Yep.

Q: Now I'm ah sure all the ah pioneers up there share all their, shared their various talents.

A: Yeah this is right. My ah Dad was also blacksmith up there going getting back to the old times again.

Ah, where he was a blacksmith to the district, he was only one there and many times he was pulled off the field to go and do blacksmith work for the neighbours. But the neighbours would share their time and operate his machine while he was their blacksmith. And so on so everybody helped one another and things just went along fine.

Q: You said that in some of that group of settlers there was some fellows there from Michigan that ah were expert in building the log houses

A: Ah, yeah, ah, Dad originally come from Michigan himself but there was some settlers around where he was in North Dakota that also was come from there and, ah, they had some experience with logs building and, ah, Dad didn't have any but, ah, they showed him how and he picked it up. So they all got together and helped one another put up these houses. So eventually they, ah, all got settle and as I said they all more or less had sod roofs (chuckling). But I guess they enjoyed it. It was the best they had.

Q: They made, ah, lime...

A: Oh yeah!

Q: ...for it?

A: Yeah! Dad, ah, knew that trade and he burnt lime three different times. He'd make a pit and put the lime stone in and burn for about 48 or 50 some hours till it was complete and then let it cool off and ah build a cover over it, it wouldn't get wet and he sold lime to the district different times. They used it for, ah, ah, white washing their houses so they were mud washed to bring their houses to a white colour

[chuckle]. It was used for many things. They even mix it with the mud plaster many did and many used sand and lime straight to just plaster.

Q: They did that matter of years way back in the last time they burnt lime go a way into, ah, the 30s, the middle 30s when you burnt lime last time and people just haul it out of their [unclear].

A: Well, them old timers all knew how to use it I don't suppose anybody would today. Not that type of lime.

Q: The raw material is really the limestones that they picked up..

A: That's right

Q: ... off the prairie, eh?

A: That's right off the prairies. There's a type that ah we didn't use their rather hard one ah I don't think they'd ah take a lot longer burning burning so he knew the type of stone. It was the best for lime.

Q: So the, you got married and got your own farm?

A: Yep I got on my own farm and started on my own. Farmed until the year '57 and I my wife wasn't too well so we quit the farm to go to BC. Live in Whiterock and, ah, sold out and came back lived Elphinstone for awhile and ah...

Q: What years would those be?

A: That would be, ah, well, ah, that would be shortly year and a half after I went to BC and that was about 5 years in Elphinstone and '63 moved to Souris and I've been here ever since. I did go back one year to BC [to the Prairie Fruit Balance] and lived one year there and came back again. We're still in Souris [chuckles]. We love it here, its nice. Nice sociable people.

Q: You did, ah, quite a variety of things even in connection with your farming.

A: Well, I, I also blacksmithed after Dad quit and ran a garage out there along with the farming. I practically lived the life Dad did because many time he came over and pulled me out of the field take my

tractor and do my work while I did their their ah blacksmithing. [Chuckle] so I guess I pretty well follow up old chip off the old block.

Q: You did some other things in there too didn't you? You were a [Watkins] man for a while?

A: Oh yeah! I did the Rowly job and ah I hauled cream for two years for farmers, anything for a dollar [chuckle].

Q: What did ya have a have a half-ton truck?

A: Yep. Yep. I, ah, cream was too heavy times I had to make two trips in one day. Oh yeah, and that was twice a week and...

Q: Off to the creamery?

A: The creamery yeah.

Q: To drop it off?

A: Yeah.

Q: How much did you get for hauling a 5 gallon can?

A: Oh, it varied depending on the grade of cream. If you had the what they called table cream you could get as high as \$10 -\$12 a can, but if your cream wasn't properly cared for you could drop down to one and get only three, three and a half for a can.

Q: It's a 5 gallon can?

A: Yep. Yep. Just depending on the grade your can, people were careless and some would care and all made the difference.

Q: What years would those be around?

A: When I hauled the cream? In, ah, 30 about 39 & 40 I approximately think.

Q: What did you get for hauling each can?

A: A can I think ran around approximately 30 cents. Not a big wage you know but, ah, the sidelines I did people in this job such as bringing out groceries for them flour and different things, all added up I I did

all right for those days. We thought it was good. We had the flour mill in Roblin you know and a lot of people used that flour but they shut off all ,ah, about in 40 I think cause the the granary still in operation all its flour went to Europe to the war purposes used in the war and so we couldn't get no more flour there. But he was still making it for going to Europe to the, ah, youths in the war, so he told us.

Q: But originally you would take a grist in there and your bag and shorts?

A: Oh yeah! Oh Yeah! You could get that stuff shorts, and wheat germ and things like that but you couldn't get the flour. No. No way. I tried I couldn't, the wife used to like it.

Q: When did you get the telephone in up there?

A: Well, these these ,um, not just positive. I'm thinking was in the 40's sometime that is we used to have pay stations but we didn't have house to house telephones as they have now.

Q: And your hydro?

00:19:56

A: Hydro? I got it. They had it a year or two south of us sooner than we got it I I if I recall right It's 52 or 53 we got the hydro. It made novel change to the district when the come in you know. You go out at night see light all over. Everybody had all the lights on for a while, they got to paying and got it [chuckles].

Q: And, ah, the nearest doctors would be?

A: Togo and Roblin. In fact they only had the as a hospital, they only had a big house they didn't have a real hospital for I think they never had a real hospital till, ah, the later thirties I think, but they did have this big house. They had somebody had made a big house there one time and it was in use wasn't in use so ah they got it through some kind of a deal and used it as a hospital for emergencies.

Q: So the nearest doctor was at Togo, which is 11 miles and Roblin 18 miles.

A: I see me take emergency cases right from our district of [San Clara?] right to Dauphin. That's where real hospital, where they got to get in and get an operations and things, ah, and more severe cases. The minor ones they did right in Roblin, there.

Q: Now you have a little workshop out behind and you still keep yourself busy?

A: Yeah.

Q: Serving the community?

A: Well yeah too kind of. A little job to occupy myself you know it's, ah I'd be lost if I didn't have anything to do so I do these little jobs such as saw sharpening, mow lawn mower sharpening, oh, just all kinds of little jobs It helps to pass the time and, ah, and, ah, the saw sharpening you get a little hard on me now its, ah, I, ah, you have to have good eyes for that you know and think I've lasted out pretty good. I should quit [chuckling].

Q: They will certainly miss you.

A: I'm not that young anymore John I'm, ah, 81 now [chuckling].

Q: But, ah, you're a real jack of all trades at that because you can fix anything that needs to be fixed.

A: Well tis helpful to anybody especially a farmer pretty near a jack of all trades now yeah, um, in this day and age when you think, ah, ah, we have a lot more then we used too. I find myself that, ah, if you have trouble with a car you got to find a guy to fix it ah and ah I don't like here in Souris, not easy to get a guy to fix a car now if you go in there they gonna fix you [laughing]. You know a little about that.

Q: You gotta pile of [unclear] wood in the, ah, back there and, ah, your still, ah, go back to your days out in the farm when it comes to [unclear] wood.

A: Yeah I still like to have the smell of the fire around the place. I have the electric heat but I do enjoy the wood heat over the furnace down there, its, that's another little job that keeps me occupied yeah, its, its good for the older person, if he able if he's got the health, keep you doing something.

Q: Thank you very much Elmer. Perhaps we might finish up with your version of the "French Minuet".

A: Okay will do John. We'll do that John and I'll thank you because I've really enjoyed this [chuckle] together. Really I love speaking on old times and...

24: 37 music starts

26:39- music stops

A: I'm just going to say a few words here John. That, ah, this tape I, ah, ah, was recorded last, ah, last fall in about, ah, in, ah, August I remember right. Old-timer. [Unclear].

End of Interview