

Westman Oral History collection

Interview Date: 1982-11-30

Narrator (interviewee): Martin, Thomas

Interviewer: Martin, Dorothy

Location: Home of Dorothy Martin

Transcriber: Bee, Richard

Date Transcribed:

Introduction from interviewer and start of clip 1 of 2 – (00:00:06)

Today is November the 30th 1982. This interview is being made with Thomas H. Martin of Neepawa for the Westman Oral History Association project, "Voices of Yesteryear" by Dorothy Martin. In 197, he came as a child of two years old with his parents to the Oberon district and has lived there till he and his wife Harriet, retired from farming in 1965. In the spring and fall he is still on the job helping with the seeding, harvesting, and fall work. He will tell us about his experiences, inn municipal road building and, also will recall his memories of the Dirty 30's.

Question (00:00:54)

What are your first memories of municipal road work?

Answer (00:01:00)

As a young man, I remember my father sending a man, a hired man, a four horse team. Sometimes a man two horse team, to do, some kind of road work, for the municipality. That fed my dad, to drag the road, ah to build up the road, sometimes called grade. Fill wha in washouts, and deepen ditches. From moving dirt, such[?] scrapers, sometimes, there were, called wheel scrapers. Were pulled with two horses. A felden[?] was pulled with four horses. All the time the, at times the man and the horses had to draw gravel, breads plank[?], mow weeds. If weeds were to be cut, the farmer used his own mower, as the municipality did not own machine. In the early 1900's the men were hired for many other different jobs, such as building w, wooden culverts repairing bridges, [unclear] along the roadside. Shoveling, and spreading gravel. Burning rods and thistles those were plentiful in those dry years. Picking stones out of certain areas, plowing and many other jobs. You may laugh when I tell you, men were paid to spread straw on the roads, in very, sandy areas. To prevent wind erosion, especially on the hills and knolls. [unclear].

Question (00:02:39)

You mentioned plowing? Plowing what?

Answer (00:02:46)

If a road was to be built, our road to be built higher. The ditches were plowed, with a farmer's plow and horses. This way the star[?] scraper could fill up, with dirt easier and quicker. This dirt was then used to fill the, the erm to make it higher.

Q. (00:03:07)

How were some of the steel culverts, or wooden culverts, put into roads or grades?

A. (00:03:13)

Sometimes, it was done the hard way, with men and shovels. They would measure the width of the culvert, and dig a trench across the road, at the desired depth, with a pick and shovel. The culvert, was then lowered into the trench, and covered over. Some times if it was a fairly large culvert, the scraper and the horses were used to dig a trench. Nowadays machine called backhoe is used to do the job.

A. (00:03:48)

Times have changed, for the better for men. Big graders, large power tractors with scrapers, huge blades, earth movers, snow plows, mounted on trucks and tractors, also, tractor-mounted mowers have made the horses, a and manual labour a thing of the past.

Q. (00:04:13)

Before our interview, you mentioned about working for the municipality. What were your experiences with road building?

A. (00:04:24)

My two, close neighbors, eh and I first became involved with road building en in the rural municipality oh of North Cypress. Which was across the road from my parents' home and my farm. In May 1929, the municipality, advertised for applications, for the operation, of its big grading outfits. For the summer. The outfit included, an Autmen[?]-Taylor tractor, a leaning wheel grader, caboose, fuel wagon, [unclear]. The operator was to get a all his help, and board themselves. The council was to furnish the gas, repairs, for the outfit. The councilors, of each ward, was to be responsive for ordering the repairs, for the outfit when it was working in his ward. My two neighbors, Lyle Thorn, Harry Byram, and I discussed the idea of tendering for the jobs. And the wages that we would want. Our tenders, had to be into the municipality, municipal office, before the end of May.

A. (00:05:51)

On June the first, 1929, the council accepted our tenders. The Byram-Thorn-Martin tenders, as it was called, for the rate of three dollars and 75 cents per hour for the summer. Our wage were agoully, actually, a dollar and a quarter per hour, for each of us. While we were grading. Or road building. We were to receive 50 cents an hour per person, while overhauling, which had to be done first. We were to begin work, immediately. It was decided, I would engineer, Lyle the grader man, and Harry was to be cook. Our chore boy, and other words jack of all trades. We had seen the outfit, only from a distance. However, we gathered up, what tools we had, wrenches etc., and headed for the outfit east of Carberry. And the [unclear] yards.

(00:07:04)

There was no one home, except, lady of the house. She told Lyle, where to get the battery, told Harry, how to get water for the engine, from the barn. I walked around that, and climbed over, that massive pile of iron, which was the engine. Harry made three trips, to the barn for water, with a 35 gallon barrel, to fill the radiator, of that engine. We poured oil, pushed grease, handed the needed parts until noon. Then we had our first dinner, in that provided caboose. Needed house cleaning badly, Harry response to that work later. A After dinner, cleared out to start that engine. Harry and Lyle, pulled on the crank, and the tractor started, without any trouble. Soon, we were on our way to Oberon, our home town. Harry began to sing, "We won't get home till moorning!" He was right! We camped at Petra[?], a little place north of Carberry for the night. We ent over nothing, or nobody, during that trip. The engine, travelled about two and a half miles per hour, and made lots of noise.

A. (00:08:41)

The next morning, we left for Oberon, getting there right on time. We started overhauling th, the outfit in the late afternoon. The work lasted the week. We chained dring[?], poured babut[?], ground valves, etc. Just as we were finished overhauling, three men from North Cypress council came, to find out, when we would be ready to start, on the road! We said, "on Monday. What kind of a road do you want?" The council quickly replied, "You fellas were hired to building the road, and should know how!" I answered "No, we were hired to run the machinery." Council, finally decided, to get a road building expert, from the Adams Grader Company, out to tell and show us, how to build a road. He, he was knowledgeable, and told Harry where to put the stake. Told me, where to drive the engine. He road with Lyle, on the grader, showing him how to operate it, how to build that first mile, west of Oberon. He was a very nice man, and a good instructor! We were a happy gang. The council we, were satisfied, with our road jobs. And [unclear] the old outfit, working so well. Everyone was, good to us. The ladies, lived near the road, would bring out raisin pies and coffee in the afternoons. We sure loved those raisin pies. So did the experts.

A. (00:10:57)

That summer we graded the roads, west from Oberon, to the Elton boundary rural municipality, west of Brookdale. Then, from there, south, three miles, south of Ingelow. Owing to poor crop, prospects, we had to shut down, the end of July. The winter of 19...29,30, we camped at the Evans brothers farm, southeast of Brookdale. And overhauled completely once again. The second year, 1930, we tendered for job again, at three dollars per hour, and were accepted. We moved to the corner, two miles west of Wellwood Ross Freeburn's[?] corner, and graded that, four and a half miles, to the east side of Wellwood Martin MacCrae's[?] corner. Then came back to the Wellwood, Carberry corner, and...and, graded the Carberry road, to Henry McLeod's, north of Carberry. Once again, money was scarce, and we

were forced, to shut down in August. Third year, 1931, Harry left us, and Lyle's brother Earl, took his place.

A. (00:12:41)

We tendered, once again, for the job, at a dollar 65 cents per hour, and were accepted. [shuffling of papers] We overhauled the outfit again, ready for the summer. However, the dirty 30's struck. The council had to call it quits, and we never turned a wheel. Fortunately, the council was able to pay us, for repairing the outfit. I never forget, working near people's lanes, and seeing the lady come out, with raisin pies. Yes we sure loved those raisin pies! People, were so good, to us. No wonder, Harry made a good job of their approaches at the end of the lane. Harry used, to buoy a few snow slabs, of wood, from the railroads, and laid them in front of the big engine wheels. When I moved the engine ahead, the big, wheel cleats would cut them into nice stove wood, for the stove in the caboose.

A. (00:14:09)

One day, on the Elton boundary we stopped for dinner. Lyle had just, got out a new, can of cup grease. There were a few cows on the road, when Harry called dinner, Lyle just set the lid on the grease pail. When he came back, after dinner, the cows had licked the grease pail out clean. We found out they sure like clean cup grease. We had to, work in sands, and among stones at times. We boys, knew nothing about stones, and [unclear] acquainted with the land, or country, west of Brookdale. About two and a half miles, west of Brookdale, there were big stones, a little larger than eh, then two 45 gallon gas drums, in the middle of the road. It was sticking up just enough, to interfere with the grading. The council, hired a man four horse team, to move the stone. Some men dug around the stone, and put some chains around it, the horses, were able to roll the stone out on the road, but could not pull it off the road, to the edge of the field! We boys pulled the huge stone, to the fence with our, tractors, the Altman[?]-Taylor engine.

Q. (00:15:44)

I understand that your gang drove a Model T truck while working on the road. Is that right?

A. (00:15:51)

Yes, we did drive a Model T truck, and it was our own truck. The best one Henry Ford ever made. The council said, "Boys, don't take the girls in the truck." The boys around Oberon, were very, very lucky, because if we had, all the girls around Oberon, would of went to all the dances, with the road gang. We had a lot of fun with the road trucks. Harry came back from, watering the horses one night, he led them behind the, the truck, [unclear]. He said, "The low gear band, is haywire. And I can't go to the dance tonight." I said "Harry, we would make another run, with the graders. You take the low band, out, and move the reverse, into its place. They are the same. We don't need to back up tonight. We can get along without the reverse." We did, without [unclear], but he dropped a nut, into the oil inside the case, and could not get it out. So Lyle got on one side, and turned the truck, on its side, and he was able to fish out the nut. While we were doing this, a car drove up, an elderly couple came running over, "Anybody hurt, anybody hurt!?" We said "No, no, we're just getting ready to go to a dance, at Oberon tonight. No problems." We got a heavy set of chains for the truck, and we found out, we could go anyplace the neighbours could go on horseback.

A. (00:17:57)

[throat clearing] When our job ran out, we were faced with the problem, as to what to do with, the truck, we all had a share in it. So we rolled the dice, low man, was to get the truck. Pay the other two, 50 dollars each, for our share of the truck. Lyle got the, truck.

Q. (00:18:26)

How does the municipal wages of today, compare to those paid in the 1920's, and the 1930's?

A. (00:18:38)

Today, the Langford municipality hires two men, to do the em municipal, roadwork. Plus, snowplowing in winters. The floorman receives 8.53 per hour, for a 50 hour week. And the second man, paid 7.37 per hour. Back, in 1930's, foreman was paid 25 cents per hour, a man got 20 cents per hour, and a man of two horses was paid 30 cents per hour. Man and three horses, got 40 cents per hour. Man and four horses, got 50 cents per hour. From 1935, to 1940, the wages rose five cents per hour. During the first world war, 1914, 1918, the municipality wages, per day, for men only a dollar 40. Man and two horses, five dollars. Man with four horses, eight dollars. Unlike machines, horses could only work, a few hours ah, and then had to be fed, watered, and rested. Nowadays, machines can run for many hours, at a time before refueling, or greasing, as long as the operator, can [unclear] before having a rest and fud.

Q. (00:20:23)

Getting back, to the municipal road building machinery used by your gang, do you know when, and how the council acquired it?

A. (00:20:35)

Yes, I do know a little about that. The tractor, our engine was called, the Altman[?]-Taylor, and cost the council 6660 dollars. At a apron meeting in 1920, the council entered into a contract, with, th, Skadalf[?] and Taylor Machine Company, for an engine which was at Portage La Prairie. It was to be shipped to Harte, a little railway station, about five miles south of home. One stipulation, in the deal, was that the engine was to be used, for grading two miles in the municipality. That the council, furnishing the fuel, for the job. In other words, a demonstration was agreed upon. The engine proved to be satisfactory, the majority of the council. Then, then, the council, would pay 6660 dollars in cash, and also, the freight charges, on it. The engine was to be shipped to Harte, on or before the 25th of May, same year. It was

tried out, it was satisfactory. It was bought that summer. And the freight from Portage, 32 dollars and 90 cents.

Q. (00:22:19)

You mentioned earlier, the dirty 30's. What were some of the hardships, and how were people helped, during this time?

A. (00:22:30)

From 19, 27 to 35, the crops were extremely poor, due to dry weather. Wind, dust storms, rust, and grasshoppers. In 1935 many farmers, burned their crops because of severe drought. I was one of those farmers. The dirty 30's struck everyone a hard blow. Work money, were both scarce. Farmers got little for their produce, such as grains, cattle, eggs, butter, chickens. Stories have been told about, farmers, shipping cattle to market. Instead of a getting a cheque in payment, they received a bill, for part of the freight. The cow had not brought, enough, to pay, for the transportation. What a heartbreak that was! Some pla families were really hard up, had no money. These needy farmers were helped, by municipalities and the government, through the unemployment relief scheme. Municipalities would buy them groceries, medicine, clothing, pay hospital bills. These people were then hired, to do municipal work, such as brushing, mowing weeds, or whatever jobs was available, for them. Thus the wages, paid, were returned to the council, and paid for th, to pay for the family bills. Some municipalities worried money, eh at first seed for the farmers, who were unable to do so. The sum, ah at 40 dollars a set, for each quarter section of land, for this seed grain relief. Some farmers took advantage of this scheme. They would sell all their grain, then purchase seed through the municipality. There's one stipulation, the farmer had to pay for his seed grain in the fall after harvest.

A. (00:25:03)

An unemployment, relief work, program, was set up to provide employment. The highway construction, to Clear Lake was one of the, big projects. In November 1932, there were about a thousand men, in relief camps at Clear Lake. With so many men, there was a shortage of playing cards. You see, men play cards, in the evening. An article was published, in the New Car[?] Press, asking for old decks, that people had no further use, of them. They could be left at the press office, and they would be forward to the relief camps. I visited that camp, once, in 1930. Some young men from our district and Neepawa, worked there, threshing, and helping build the roads, from Norway Gate[?] to Clear Lake. The men were happy and well fed. Any relief work provided by the municipality, had its costs, shared by both provincial and federal governments. The total of 4000 was set aside, as the figures for relief in each municipality. Costs were shared as follows: 20 percent municipality, 30 percent provincial, and 50 percent federal. In those Depression years, the consolidated school districts, set up a system, for driving school vans. Farmers took turns, driving their own vans whith. They were allowed a certain number of days, to drive for each quarter section of land they owned. Instead of receiving a paycheck, the money went towards paying their taxes.

A. (00:27:22)

1920, 1930's, there were those families who did not own any land, and they rented land wherever they could, and generally moved from one place to another e, every two to three years. Sometimes, they could only stay in the building, over the winter, which meant more moving. Of course, some people were good renters, while others were poor. The municipality and the governments worked together in placing needy families into, from the city, and that they could house, in the countryside, and little towns, with the hope of finding jobs for them. A family came to live in ah, in an empty house, in our district. Instead of going to the nearby bush for firewood, they pulled the the, boards, siding, off the house and

burned it in the stove. They weren't very good [unclear], of the help, given them. Many farmers, hired the, unemployed men and women for the winters, under the employment scheme set up by the, federal government. The hired help, received, five dollars per month, from the government, which in turn, gave the, the farmer five dollars for taking the hired help. Most farmers, gave their five dollars to the, hired hand. At least, the unemployed had food, and homes, for the cold months, cold months. In spite of hard times, everybody seemed to enjoy themselves. Card parties, house dances, skating, curling, were among the social activities. As for the, road building jobs, we were a sore gang. When we finished working for the North Cypress municipality, we enjoyed working together, loved the outfit. No one will ever know, how much we loved, and looked forward to those raisin pies.

End of Clip 1 of 2 (00:29:44)

Start of Clip 2 of 2 (00:31:04)

Q. (00:31:06)

Before ending this interview, I would like to ask you some more questions. You mentioned shoveling and drawing gravel. How was the work accomplished in those days?