

Westman Oral History collection

Interview Date:	1982-03-11
Narrator (interviewee):	Clifford Clarke
Interviewer:	Elmer Armstrong
Location:	Elkhorn, Manitoba
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Date Transcribed:	2014-10-02

00:00:00 This is march 11th 1982 the following interview is with Mr. Clifford Clarke of Elkhorn who has been for several years the curator of the Elkhorn automobile museum the main subject of this discussion are the Elkhorn automotive uh museum which of course uh contains many other items other than automobiles household agricultural equipment and uh a wide range of uh antiques and old articles it also deals to considerable extend with Mr. Isaac Clarkson who is uh credited with having founded the museum uh at one time the museum was his own personal collection and was then turned over to the Elkhorn museum board. In order that it might be perpetuated indefinitely this interview is being conducted by Elmer Armstrong for the West man oral history voices of yesteryear.

00:01:45 00:02:52 **Question** (Elmer Armstrong) What position did you hold at uh Elkhorn's museum?

00:02:58 **Answer** (Clifford Clarke) Well I was Isaac Clarkson's assistant until of Ike's passing then I took over as the curator of the museum

00:03:06 **Q**(EA) Are you still the curator? Uh What can you tell me about the uh museum and the uh operation of it.

A (CC) Well it started back in 1946 when Mr. Clarkson came to the Chamber of Commerce with the idea of setting up some type of a building for a museum in Elkhorn and then they went to the Chamber of Commerce picked it up and started to raise some uh funds for to build a building in Elkhorn and buy some property to set the building on and as Mr. Clarkson had started his own collection in 1946 well he had quite a number of automobiles collected at that time and was running out of room while his idea was if we could arrange to set a museum up in the village or close to the village of Elkhorn through the efforts of the Chamber of Commerce and then Mr. Clarkson went to Winnipeg with the Judge J.W.M. Thompson lawyer to draw up the constitution for the Manitoba Automotive Museum uh Foundation well on the 31st day of March 1961 it was proclaimed in the Chamber in Winnipeg and parliament buildings then registered with the province of Manitoba as a non-profit organization and passed so it became officially known as the Manitoba Automobile Museum Foundation in 1967 the year of the centennial there was grants came out from the Dominion, Provincial, and from the village of Elkhorn and the municipality of Wallace which give them approximately half the price of the building and the

land they were to put this building on. So they uh raised some more money and then they borrowed some money from the bank and got a brand new building and it was 56 x 100 feet and in 19 no in the fall of summer of 1968 lke Clarkson put in 37 automobiles and 1 show case full of smaller ware household ware dishes and the likes of that from his grandparents. And uh in 1968 I started work for the museum board in Elkhorn and I may as well tell yah on that board when Mr. Clarkson set up the foundation he put on that board a board of directors to operate that museum and in the constitution it calls for the mayor of the village of Elkhorn to be the Chairman of the board, 3 of the elected councillors of the village of Elkhorn, 2 members of the rural municipality of Wallace council, and they could pick their own secretary, and the bank manager was to always be the treasurer of the board. Uh and on the passing of Mr. Clarkson in October 1971 I was appointed by the board as curator and upon the passing of Mr. Clarkson we were left with a problem we had eh not enough building space to hold the balance of Mr. Clarkson's collection well in 1974 1972 pardon me the board borrowed enough money from the bank on the building in contest to build a building 100 feet unto the end of the one that was there and with a little bit of good luck and management we managed to have it paid for by 1974 and in 1973 late in the fall of 73 the Dominion government came out with a programme for museum grants to museums across the Dominion of Canada with a total of \$9.4 Million. I attended a museum seminar in Winnipeg and I met Mr. Louis Lamule (?) who was the director of this programme to give money to museums across Canada uh we secured a application form we brought it back and presented it to the board we made out a application and with uh some success we received a grant of \$25 000 from the Dominion government. So in the spring of 1974 we built another 80 feet of building on the back 20 feet of building on the front and when we had that completed we were lucky to have almost enough room to store Mr. Clarkson's Collection. . . The uh inside of the building was insulated covered completely with peg board and the front had a grass front put in it and uh we still had 17 vehicles and we had no room to store them in but we had been very fortunate and we had been able to have the buildings paid for pay the taxes and uh in the fall 1981 we came up with a figure that we had enough money to build another building for to keep the repairs and parts and other vehicles that needed repairing so in the spring of 1982 we will be erecting a new building of 40x60 feet and we hope that that will be enough room to completely house Mr. Clarkson's collection in steel buildings were no fire is gonna burn down these wooden buildings we have em stored in today.

00:09:40 Q (EA) The total length then of the main building must be how long?

A (CC) well the building today is 302 feet long.

00:09:48 Q (EA) And uh as you say it has paid for itself uh has it paid for itself out of uh the money people pay to see it or uh other means of raising funds?

A (CC) As a rule we have a information tourist information booth inside of that building the provincial government have give in the past given us a grant it started out in early 70's \$400 that the provincial government has increased that grant up to the present day of \$2000 We have made application to the provincial government this year for that \$2000 grant but other then that grant that museum has paid for itself and its not broke yet.

00:10:36 **Q** (EA) um Mr. Clarkson has uh contributed a tremendous amount of uh very valuable antiques what did he receive for them?

A (CC) Mr. Clarkson did not want any money for what the work that he done nor the vehicles donated to that museum it was his lifelong dream to preserve the past in automobiles from the area local area mind you he travelled thousands of miles and weeks on end to gather up pieces, and parts there's some of those vehicles that he spent 17 years gathering up pieces and parts from different places and at last he had enough parts to completely build a automobile.

00:11:35 **Q** (EA) During the time that Mr. Clarkson was uh gathering up and accumulating this collection did he receive any financial assistance of any kind?

A (CC) None what so ever all on his own spending all his own money.

00:11:52 **Q** (EA) and uh what was his means of a livelihood how did he make the money to spent on that venture.

A (CC) he was farming he had livestock and Mr. Clarkson was a naturalist he believed in uh preservation of wildlife and uh during the early 50's we had a flood of water around the country and uh we had enormous amounts of muskrats and mink come into the country and this is the story that Mr. Clarkson told me himself that during the winter of 50 and the spring 51 and the fall of 52 he went out and he trapped over 600 mink and some of those mink at that time he got as high as \$90 a piece for them and that was when Mr. Clarkson really started in to collect cars because he had a little cattle to work with and that's how he got that money from mother nature and out of those 600 mink Mr. Clarkson had the ability to tell the tracks of the mink in the snow wither that mink was male or female and out those 600 and some mink he only caught 3 females the rest were all males he was a marvellous man in his ability to know what something looked like even though he had never seen it he knew what it looked like.

00:13:26 **Q** (EA) What uh was Mr. Clarkson family eh what did that consist of.

A (CC) well he had two sisters and a brother his two sisters are still living on their fathers farm but ike left home when he was a boy of 14 and he worked around for the neighbours in at different places until 1945 and then he went to work for Mr. Ablett (?) and he run the Ablett establishment but he had land of his own well before that and he stayed there until the time of his death.

00:14:07 **Q** (EA) eh he never had a wife and family of his own then?

A (CC) no he had no family nope just himself

00:14:12 **Q** (EA) uh ... had ike not uh contributed this collection to the uh Elkhorn museum uh is there any estimates as to what he might have received for it otherwise?

A (CC) Back before be in the late 50s Mr. Clarkson was offered at one time by a resident of the Unites States the sum of \$100 000 for his collection and a guaranteed job for life as a curator in the United States and Mr. Clarkson told the gentlemen that the uh collection that he had was not for sale at any

price it would be staying in the province of Manitoba and preferably in the town of Elkhorn and of course the things have changed since the time of Mr. Clarkson's death and I have had people tell me that the collection today is worth approximately a million and a half dollars.

00:15:19 Q (EA) That's the collection uh apart from the buildings and housings.

A (CC) Mr. Clarkson had absolutely no money in the buildings all he done was you build the buildings and I'll fill em. And this is what Mr. Clarkson has done he filled them buildings with his collection.

00:15:34 Q (EA) so you would estimate the value of the collection at a low \$1.5 million

A (CC) At a million and a half dollars and the oldest one he has running is a 1908 Renault 2 cylinder and he had 117 automobiles

00:15:50 Q (EA) When Mr. Clarkson found these abandoned automobiles eh many of them not all complete parts missing parts deteriorated uh how would he have replaced these did he just send to the dealer for a new part or eh what other means would he have.

A (CC) No, Mr. Clarkson had the ability to make things with his hands and use his own brains and I have seen him make things out of a pile of junk most people would call it but give him a month at it and you'd wonder what happened to it the the ability that the man had was something tremendous the way that he could mold and solder and make wood work and bend metals and uh use silver solder on tin there's vehicles there that he has silver soldered and you cannot find were he soldered it was a marvellous way to watch him work and he had very few tools of any kind a hammer and a pair of pliers and he could cut metal with a big pear of tin shears as quick as I could cut paper with a pair of scissors and upholstery it was marvellous to watch him work he would take a piece of leather turn it upside down draw pictures on it turn it around and then tip it up away and sew it and make a diamond design of the old leather car seats and backs I remember watched him one day do one and he had two hides sewn together and there was 17.5 inches long and within 10 hours that upholstery was in the back end of a 1913 Studebaker.

00:17:53 Q (EA) Were would he get the uh hides to work with did he tan them himself or did he buy them.

A (CC) the majority of his good leather came from England he ordered it through the agent in Brandon and they would because they were coloured you could get blue or grey or black and whichever car he was doing he would get one or two hides I know this one pair of hides that he got all the way from England were \$45 a hide today you can't buy them for \$2000.

00:18:30 Q (EA) if he had to shape the back of a seat or the wooden rim of a steering wheel or a wooden wheel what uh procedure would he use to do that.

A (CC) Well when he was making steering wheels and wooden ferrules for the wheels he had a old fuel tank out of a old Studebaker car he cut the top out of it he would fill it full of water he would bring it to a boil he would set in this hard wood as shaped to the near perfect dovetail the ends of it and then he

would boil it for so long then he would take it out and bend it into shape and then make a jig to hold it while it dried and when it dried he had a finished product then all he had to do was polish it and varnish it.

00:19:20 **Q** (EA) Would it look authentic?

A (CC) There's some up there on a model T ford you couldn't tell if he made it or it come from the factory.

00:19:30 **Q** (EA) When you pick up a old motor that's been sitting in the weather for an indefinite period of time and has rusted and seized what would he do with that?

A (CC) He had several ways of uh taking a motor that was seized up completely rusted he had two or three different ways he could make that motor work he would try it first by taking out the spark plugs and taking out the cam shaft and letting all the valves close sealing the top of the piston with used oil and diesel fuel and then he would pump gun grease down through the spark plug hole with a grease nipple on it and keep the continual pressure on it and if that didn't loosen it up then he would take the thing completely apart and uh push out all the pistons and take the whole thing apart and on the older cars the old Overlands and the old Fords he would revalve it all bearings by hand and trim them out with a babbitt trimmer which we have and uh some were even brand new but that's the way he done it all.

00:20:50 **Q** (EA) A Babbitt trimmer uh is that a hand tool?

A (CC) that is a hand tool you trim those out by hand.

00:20:58 **Q** (EA) how would he get such parts as the valves and piston rings and valve springs and uh small pieces of say uh locking collars and you know minor parts

A (CC) he would gradually gradually pick those pieces up as he toured the country he'd be away 4 or 5 days at a come time he'd come home with a wooden box or a cardboard box or a old grain bag with parts and pieces he gathered them up all over the country within approximately a 200 mile radius of Elkhorn . . . He could gather up door locks door handles top bows radiators radiator shells radiator caps uh headlights sidelights and uh everything he had the ability to know if he had a car he'd had to have these parts for it so when on his travels if he bought a Model T Ford and if he had a new Overlander or a old Studebaker, or a hotmobile or something like that that was a pile of garbage there might be some parts of that vehicle that he knew he would need so he would buy it.

00:22:11 **Q** (EA) how would he obtain tyres for example uh obsolete sizes.

A (CC) well the uh last set of tyres he got were 34x4's he ordered them from a Firestone dealer in Brandon and it took them approximately 6 months to get to him and they cost him a \$117 apiece and they were made in India.

00:22:39 **Q** (EA) and how long ago would that be.

A (CC) that would be 1969.

00:22:45 **Q (EA)** to get these uh obsolete tyres sizes the price of them then is that a proportion to the commonly used sizes is it?

A (CC) Oh yeah there 5 times as much as an ordinary tyre and of course nowadays there ridiculous an old friend of mine bought a set of small tyres for a 1907 hotmobile it cost him \$749 for four tyres and they'll just be sitting on that vehicle they'll never be driven.

00:23:13 **Q (EA)** Could you name me a few of the uh uncommon uh examples of the cars that he does have in the museum er that you have in the museum to me

A (CC) yes he has a little four cylinder Saxon runabout 1916 he has a 1918 V8 Chevrolet touring a 1921 V8 Oldsmobile a 1914 Gray Dort 1917 Gray Dort he has a 1914 Briscoe very rare he has a 1938 Pontiac straight 8 roadster very rare he has a 1913 Case model 30 touring very rare in original condition a 1914 Hupmobile with one of the the original spare tyre is on the front wheel now original colour never been painted he has a 1917 McLaughlin Buick 6 original a 1912 Buick original a 1914 Cadillac truck used during the last the First World War a 1916 fire truck a 1914 Overland hearse these are very rare cars.

00:25:02 **Q (EA)** does he have a old Manitoba car.

A (CC) No he don't have a Manitoba car nope. He don't have a Winnipeg car.

00:25:13 **Q (EA)** There were such things were there.

A (CC) umhum he don't have a Saskatoon car he don't have a Moose Jaw car but there is some of those in the country yeah.

00:25:21 **Q (EA)** uh there used to be a little old car sitting in ah a garage where I believe it is where the post office in Virden sits now at the front were Eddie Stanton used to live I can't remember the name of the garage man I thought he got that old car.

A (CC) A 1909 Metz now there is a 2 cylinder friction drive car operative today.

00:25:50 **Q (EA)** that's a that's in the museum today

A (CC) In the we got that from Wallace Gibson used to live in Virden he got that car in 1970 Manitoba centennial year.

00:26:01 **Q (EA)** Did they build cars in uh the various provinces at one time.

A (CC) yes they build cars in Winnipeg cars they build in Moose Jaw they build cars in Saskatoon and these were cars that the local people put up the money to start these things in business they didnt last too long but they did build them.

00:26:24 **Q (EA)** Do you have any idea how long these companies lasted or how many cars they produced.

A (CC) Well the Moose Jaw car company lasted well it made 6 cars and then it folded out the one in Saskatoon made cars for about 8 months and it folded out.

00:26:43 **Q (EA)** um did Mr. Clarkson get very many of these restored vehicles into a road worthy condition?

A (CC) he has uh 117 there's 67 that are operated.

00:26:59 **Q (EA)** They could be licensed.

A (CC) yup, well you can't get a license as they've only got two wheel brakes on em you can't have a license with only two wheel brakes in the province of Manitoba for em to drive on the road.

00:27:09 **Q (EA)** So if they were license then they can be licensed for special purposes.

A (CC) special purpose only you can get a permit to operate them.

00:27:19 **Q (EA)** and uh what a times would they operated them on the road would they ever operate out on the road.

A (CC) No we never take them on the highway no we drive them around town or local fairs or local car show and things like that but that's the only time we use them we never take them out on the highway. Because a lot of them have tyres on the car that are as old as the cars so this is the reason we can't take these away because their original tyres and when you blow a tyre then well that's the end of that vehicle for the day and you don't have another tyre to slip on.

00:27:54 **Q (EA)** In more times since uh Mr. Clarkson has turned his collection over to the Elkhorn museum board um what has been added to it since then.

A (CC) well a gentleman from Winnipeg give us a 1957 Chevrolet 4 door sedan that has over 500 000 miles on it we have a 1947 Dodge coupe donated to us we have a 1958 Studebaker donated to us we have a 1965 Chevrolet 4 door donated to us we have a Imperial Oil farm fuel delivery truck donated to us by Imperial Oil in Winnipeg we have a 1921 Renault paddy wagon that we got from the museum of man and nature in Winnipeg we have a 1921 white truck ¾ ton that was used by the T.E. Eaton company as a delivery truck we got that from the museum of man and nature in Winnipeg we have a horse drawn delivery wagon that we got from the museum of man and nature in Winnipeg we also have in there donated to us something we wanted badly for years it was a 1928 Model A ford car converted into a snowmobile that has tracks on it our local doctor used to have one years ago in Elkhorn Dr. Johnson (?) and Sid Johnson (?) the telephone operator man had one and we got this one from the town of Arborg (?) Manitoba from Misses Seal(?) she donated it to us all we had to do was go and get it and bring it home and that's is the last vehicle since Mr. Clarkson passed on.

00:30:02 **Q (EA)** have you ever been able to get any of the old snow planes?

A (CC) no everything we have with a snow plane was a propeller the one that doc Johnson used to have we got the propeller off of the one he had that's the only one we have.

00:30:16 end of interview