

Westman Oral History Collection

Interview date: 1982-11-22

Narrator (interviewee): Ethel Allen

Interviewer: Dorothy Martin

Location: Neepawa, Manitoba

Transcriber: Sarah Gerdis-Filipchuk

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[Begin Transcript 00:00:09]

Today November 22nd, 1982, misses Ethel Allen of Neepawa is being interviewed by Dorothy Martin for the Westman oral history association project voices of yesteryear. In June 1980 she retired from her job after eight and a half years as administrator of the Osborone[?] senior citizens home in Neepawa she will give a short history of her ancestors the Potter and Baker families of Springhill district which is Northwest of Neepawa the Baker clan received the century farm award in 1977 and Barry and Bernice Baker are operating the farm now.

[Muffled noises]

[Noise from audio turning on]

[00:00:53]

Dorothy Martin Question: From where did your ancestors come?

Ethel Allen Answer: Well, my great grandfather Joseph Potter, immigrated from England to Canada and he settled in Cobourg [?] Ontario where Jonah Potter my grandfather was born in 1849. As a young man Jonah moved to the backwoods of Haliburton... County which is today a beautiful summer resort. Now in 1860 Jacob pocket also came from Canada to Canada from England he too settled in Haliburton County on the opposite side of the lake which is named for kashagawigamog meaning long narrow water. It was there that Jonah Potter married Jane pocket daughter of Jacob pocket and their daughter Mary Rebecca who was my mother was born in May 1876.

Dorothy Martin: Continue

Ethel Allen: In the winter of 1877 and 78 Jonah caught the Red River fever that was an expression and decided to move to the northwest. In May 1878 he gathered together his available cash his personal belongings and his Carpenter tools and set out with his family accompanied by a brother Eli. Their trip was uh... consisted of travelling by train Sarnia and then by boat up the Great Lakes to Duluth, by train to fisher's landing on the Red River then by boat down the Red River to old Fort Garry which is Winnipeg there they hired a team of horses to bring them to Portage la Prairie and in those days Portage between Portage and Winnipeg it was very wet it was almost like a lake, so they had to walk to ease the load and at Portage

[00:03:00]

they purchased a yoke of oxen and a wagon and started out to hunt land leaving their families at Portage. They travelled to the Springhill district Northwest of Neepawa and Jonah filed claim on northeast 35-15-16 then he returned to Portage taking three weeks for the round trip. So, Jonah and family arrived at their homestead with oxen and wagon in 1878, my mother was two years old at that time. For the first three months they lived in a tent until Jonah could build a log cabin

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uh flies, mosquitos are [unclear] by the millions in those days. One recollection of my mother's was when grandpa was away to Portage for supplies, a band of ponies belonging to Adam Mackenzie came around and started bothering the cow which was tethered out by a smudge the smudge was to keep the mosquitos away of course. Grandma was afraid of pon- the ponies would run over the tent, so she put the cow in the log cabin whi- which was not yet completed it was minus the door and windows and she stayed with the cow all night. So, the next day she built a pole fence around the tent she also had two hens and rooster that this is all they could purchase when they left Portage and they were in a pen at the corner of the cabin. One night a wolf howled nearby so she pounded on the stove pipes the remainder the night ha to frighten the wolf away and protect her poultry. Uh grandma was on the homestead nine months or so before meeting another white woman then a family moved in about two miles away that they were the Samuel Watson's, and they had a quite a large family. They settled on the farm which later was owned by Howard and Wes Noble[?] that would be about two to three miles east of the homestead. Grandma being the only white woman in the district baked bread for all the men in radius of three or five miles and each man had to cut wood for the stove and payment.

[Audio connection noises]

Ethel Allen: Other first settlers in the Springhill district where Sam William and Albert Pocket, all brothers of grandma and Seth Potter brother of Jonah and Eli.

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Then there were the Bonnies... Albert Clark, the Freed's, Jackson's Elliott's, McCracken's and later the Crandle's[?] and the Newels[?] and the Yerkses[?].

Dorothy Martin Q: What were some of your mothers' early recollections of childhood?

Ethel Allen A: Besides the story about the ponies and the wolf umm... she remembered grandpa breaking a small piece of land for potatoes and some grain in 1879, that would be there next year

there after they homesteaded. She also remembered an occasion when grandpa got mixed up in his days

[00:06:00]

he was stacking and when some neighbours drove by and informed him that it was Sunday, as he always kept the Sabbath, he immediately quit but when he asked them where they were going, they said "going to the mountain to look for wild plums" so he replied, "you are worse than I am because you know it's Sunday".

Another recollection was of Grandma walking to Salisbury to Miller store for salt and grandpa walking to Gladstone to get a ploughshare sharpened.

[Clears throat]

Mother's first recollection of Neepawa was Claire and Brown ale store and I believe this should be Brown store, but it was at the brow, on the brow of the hill on Hamilton Street and later the courthouse which is built a way back in the Bush the same courthouse which the town Neepawa in 1892 held a referendum and electric voted to keep and restore this historic building.

In 1884, mother entered school in the Acton[?] schoolhouse which stood on the northwest corner at which was later James Young's farm toward Eden and her first teacher was Harry Mitchell of Neepawa. Then school was opened in an old building opposite Springhill church in 1885 with Ms. Collier[?] in charge followed by Wesley Halpenny[?]. Then a schoolhouse was built and opened in 1885 and when school opens on April 1st, 1886, Ms. Matilda McLean was in charge. She was a sister of Mrs. James A. Claire and was a bookkeeper in Claire store that Neepawa for many many years. The next teacher was Ms. Coburn then came Mr. Klein[?], Ms. McFeatters[?] and the last teacher was Ms. Gilbreath[?].

Another recollection was the big Prairie fire in 1886 it started on a Sunday South of Minnedosa and driven by a strong southwest wind swept through to lake Manitoba, grandpa and I'm sure many of the other settlers had his land fire guarded by a width of ploughing so suffered no loss. This is pretty well the history of my mother's younger life, now for my dad George A. Baker who also came from Haliburton County Ontario, his birthday was October 1872. His father Avner Baker was born in Guysborough Nova Scotia of United Empire loyalist's [unclear] and came to Ontario then called upper Canada as a young man. His mother Elizabeth Smith was born in Ontario, and it is believed that her people

[00:09:00]

came from the New England states. My dad also grew up beside lake kashagawigamog this lake provided many happy hours of boating, swimming, and skating for the young people in those days and was also a great means of transportation from one settlement to another as well as providing plenty of fish, it is now bordered by summer cottages.

During the winter of 1891 and 92 when my dad was around 19 or 20 his uncle went back to Ontario from Manitoba to visit, he painted such a glowing picture of farm life in Manitoba that my dad decided right then and there that he must see this wonderful place. So, in March 1892 he and a friend Henry Bonnie came West, he arrived by train at Neepawa, and they were met by another Uncle William Jackson, and they drove out the Springhill in a wagon on a cold winter dreary day in March he was not impressed by the country or the weather. The first six years he worked as a farm labourer wages were around twenty dollars per month on a yearly basis. Some of these years he worked for Jonah Potter his future father-in-law and on July the 20th 1898 he married Mary Potter who was my mother in Springhill church. The first seven years of their married life they lived on adjoining quarter to the Potter farm then grandma and grandpa retired and moved to BC and my mother and dad moved to the farm home.

During their years on this original farm, they raised a family of seven, five boys and two girls, I am the youngest girl. My dad in later years was very involved in the community such as church, choir, school, he was secretary treasurer for forty years of Springhill school and municipal orange lodge and when the highways were being built worked as gravel inspector for three seasons. This was in the 1930s which were hard years, but conditions did eventually improve. Mother and dad retired to Neepawa about 1950s and their son Bob and wife Anne remained to farm. This farm today is 105 years old the present occupants and owners are Bob and Anne Baker and their son Barry and wife Bernice and family.

On the farms 100th birthday Bob and Anne were host to many relatives, friends and neighbours also former Springhill residents when they held a Centennial farm celebration.

[00:12:00]

It was a beautiful day and friends from near and far met and enjoyed reminiscing, the day ended with everyone dancing on the lawn to the music of the Potter orchestra. The huge spruce trees which were planted by Grandpa Potter still stand forming a beautiful background for the large lawn and modern homes of the two families. At the present time November 1982, the 5th generation this is the family of Barry and Bernice are growing up on this farm I sincerely trust that this family farm will continue on in the same tradition for many years.

[Audio muffling]

[00:12:41]

Dorothy Martin: The Neepawa's courthouse referendum date should be 1982 not 1892.

[End of interview]