

**Westman Oral History Collection**

**Interview Date:** 1982-02-13

**Narrator (Interviewee):** Alex McPhail

**Interviewer:** Frank Anderson

**Location:** Brandon, Manitoba

**Transcriber:** Alana Donohoe

**Date Transcribed:** 2017-09-26

**Recording Format:** Cassette

**Length of Recording:** 1:01:10

[00:005]

Today is February the 13<sup>th</sup>, 1982. This interview is conducted with Alex McPhail of Brandon, at his residence 62 Clement Drive Brandon. Mr. McPhail has had a long and distinguished career as an agriculturist in the Brandon area, and also as manager of the Provincial Exhibition and the Manitoba Winter Fair. This interview is conducted by Frank Anderson, for the Westman Oral History Association project "Voices of Yesteryear."

[00:00:37] Question: Alex, what do you know about the early McPhail history in Canada and when did they come to the [pause) North Brandon district?

[00:00:48] Answer: First members of the family came to Brandon in 1878, and that... that was three of my uncles of my fathers came out here and homesteaded on umm 18...17, 18-11-18.

[00:01:05] Q: 18-11-18?

[00:01:07] A: Yeah. And my dad then came out in 1879 on... working on the railroad, and uh he worked on the rail road until it was uh completed. But he sort of made his home at my uncle's place.

[00:01:25] Q: And where did they come from?

[00:01:26] A: They came from the Ottawa Valley in Ontario.

[00:01:30] Q: Mhm. And your uh... father, uh was railroading for sometime?  
Um

[00:01:33] A: He was working on the railroad, on the CPR for building the road through.

[00:01:40] Q: And how long did he work at that?

[00:01:42] A: Well he worked at it 'til.. until 1885 until the last spike was driven in that... uh met up with the people working west, or east rather, from the east coast.

[00:01:53] Q: And um... then he started farming on his own?

[00:01:57] A: Yes, he came back and bought the north-west quarter of 21-11-18, from the CPR and uh borrowed a plow and a team of horses from my uncles to break up the sod. And as a matter of interest they had to take the buffalo bones off that land before they could plow it up 'cause it had been a centre for a buffalo population before that time.

[00:02:21] Q: The Indians must have had a buffalo [pause] kill, at some point or another?

[00:02:24] A: Yeah I guess so.. yeah. The deal with I suppose with the CPR was that they paid seven dollars and acre for that land and got four dollars and acre back for every acre they had broken up in three years. So, to qualify for uh for this rebate umm they raised the price.

[00:02:45] Q: At that cost must have be cost about four dollars an acre?

[00:2:48] A: Yeah, about that.

[00:02:50] Q: That piece about the buffalo bones is interesting, because when we were [pause] fencing on the east road allowance there across from your farm... uh oh back in the 30s we [pause] uh uncovered an Indian hammer head.

[00:03:04] A: Yeah. There are quite a few of those hammer heads and uh and old arrow points, and one thing or another [coughs]. We used to find them even when I started there occasionally. Those hammers were a groove cut out of...

[00:03:19] Q: Right, that's what this was. Now uh, your father established his farm there and uh... from the original quarter he expanded.

[00:03:29] A: Yes, he went back to Ontario in 1892 and uh married my mother. And they came out in about 1904, he bought the southwest quarter of that same section from a Mr. Alec Cole who had broke it, well it had been broke up before that by Tom Miller, who lives up nears Justice, just near there. And my dad bought the quarter from him, and he had the whole half section by that time.

[00:03:59] Q: And then later on he uh, he moved the building site to a half mile down the line?

[00:04:05] A: That's right, the uh building start right up in the North-West corner but, they had trouble getting water up there so it moved down to the centre and the building got put up there and are still.

[00:04:18] Q: I can still remember those maple trees where the original buildings were they were still there when I.. I was a kid.

[00:04:24] A: Yes, and the evergreen trees and... and the row of the trees were there when Mr. Cole had lived and had put them in.

[00:04:32] Q: Ah yes, but they are all gone now.

[00:04:35] A: Yeah, we took them all down.

[00:04:36] Q: Well then, he built [pause], a very substantial house and uh barn, on the new site?

[00:04:45] A: Yeah and the interesting part of that is that talking about what these things cost and all they had to do. Now the original house finished Brooklyn era near cost three thousand dollars and the barn 44 by 66 was eighteen hundred dollars. Completed around between 1904 and 1907.

[00:05:04] Q: You couldn't replace those buildings in that style of day for three or four hundred thousand dollars.

[00:05:09] A: No, it would cost a lot of money.

[00:05:11] Q: You couldn't get the material that was in the barn, or what is in the barn anyways.

[00:05:15] A: No, no well unfortunately the barn was burned about four years ago. But those big timbers that you mentioned were made of straight big Douglas Fir without a knot or bend in them. And they were put up uh... a while there was more to distend the braces and the beams up in the barn. Which made them really substantial. And that other old house that you speak of, you know it is standing just as straight as the day that it was put up.

[00:05:42] Q: And uh, your father farmed there for many years?

[00:05:48] A: Yes he farmed there until uh.. it was 1915 and he was appointed as farm superintendent at the mental hospital and I took over the farm in 1915.

[00:05:59] Q: And uh, then you uh...that, that would be when he actually left the farm to start your job. And you then shortly after that you were the uh in World War One, and you were in the air force?

[00:06:15] A: Yeah in the next year in 1916 I left there. And in Toronto I took training there.

[00:06:21] Q: And how was the farm work while you were away?

[00:06:24] A: Well we had my sister living, the oldest sister was keeping house for me and lived on the farm, uh she stayed there and we had hired a couple that worked the land, an English couple that they worked on the farm while I was away.

[00:06:43] Q: I think that I remember that fellow.

[00:06:45] A: Yeah, Jim Bowes was his name.

[00:06:47] Q: Yes, he came over for uh turkey or something, or some oats or something, yeah I remember.

[00:06:54] A: Most likely, yeah.

[00:06:55] Q: Yeah, yeah. And uh, would you care to say a little about you experience in the air force?

[00:07:00] A: Oh, I wasn't much experienced I uh, got through and got my wings and I was uh doing some instructing down there for, until the war ended. Around Toronto uh [unclear] that was a big airport for Air Force Canada, it was east of Toronto, along the lake. And uh so it wasn't very spectacular.

[00:07:29] Q: And then after you were discharged, you came back to the farm?

[00:07:33] A: Yes I came back to the farm and uh... in the spring or winter on eighteen hundred nineteen or uh nineteen hundred-eighteen and 1919 and uh took over the farm again and uh I finally bought the land from my dad later on. Shortly after I married in 1933.

[00:07:57] Q: So you actually lived there from about 1919 after you returned from the air force until 1949, that would be about a period of thirty years?

[00:08:10] A: Yeah.

[00:08:12] Q: And uh, what do you remember about before we get to far about the farm history. Where did you attend school? And what do you remember about your early school days?

[00:08:22] A: Well I attended school at the old church school, and uh things weren't too uh probable on the farm at that time and uh I went up to grade nine there and I stayed on the farm.

[00:08:40] Q: They uh. I started school in 1918 and I remember that the first nice day in the spring, in what we called the big boys they would be gone. They'd be out of school and uh they didn't come back until the first snow flew in the fall.

[00:08:58] A: That's right we stayed at home and worked on the farm through the summer and went back to school in the winter time.

[00:09:05] Q: They ah...

[00:09:06] A: Such with it

[00:09:08] Q: That's quite a change from today. Ah, those boys when they went out of school in the spring they would go home and turn fanning bills and stuff like that.

[00:09:19] A: Right.

[00:09:20] Q: A lot of hard manual labour.

[00:09:22] A: Ah walk behind the harrows.

[00:09:23] Q: Yes.

[00:09:25] A: And uh did everything by hand it was a lot of horse work at the time.

[00:09:30] Q: And ah, then in the fall they always stayed until the... for the harvest.



[00:09:36] A: Harvest in the fall working on the field until the ground froze up and then it was back to school.

[00:09:41] Q: Back to school. Now, what do you remember about this school? Tariff school uh it'd be a one room school.

[00:09:50] A: One room school it had about eight grades in it and one teacher and it had about oh I would suppose they average about twenty-five to thirty pupils in about eight or nine different grades.

[00:10:04] FLIP TAPE

[00:10:10] Q: Now Alec, in your... the thirty years on the farm and your fathers period before that. Would you say a word about the um livestock that you kept? Now I know that your father was a breeder of Yorkshire pigs known across Canada, and you carried on that work.

[00:10:33] A: Yes, I had. My father was one of the first importers of Yorkshire pigs, uh in western Canada. They brought the original stock from the old country and he built them up to suit the climatic condition in Canada. And uh made quite a success in what he sold in breeding stuff all over Canada and part of the United States and uh we kept them going until a few years ago, when we finally quit the pig business all together, and he was interested as well in Clydesdale horses and imported some of purebred Clydesdales from Scotland and uh we raised and bred Clydesdales and showed them at different exhibitions until he left the farm. I don't know, we

carried them on afterward, after that as well. And uh we also had a herd of pure bred shorthorn cattle which were kept held up. And sold for breed stock and were interested in pure bred for Shorthorns. And uh it seems quite a while ago, my dad also had a flock of sheep, Oxford Downs and uh we would have up to 300 yews there and uh. So when he left the farm, I didn't want the sheep, so he sold the sheep as well when he left the farm. So that pretty well ran the hold gantlet of the livestock. We had horses and pigs and sheep and cattle, and uh it was quite an interesting experience, because there weren't too many people in that sort of purebred business at that time. But uh it was interesting and uh, it was all quite a mark for breeding spot for all different breeds.

[00:12:43] Q: Do you know, we had part of a grain elevator at our place, that my dad bought from your father. It was made by the Brandon Machine and Implement Works, he must've bought about when you were in the air force I think. It was one in the at the Brandon Exhib-... Provincial Exhibition and it had on the side of the hopper, donated by Brandon Machine and Implement works for the best heavy draft team and harnessed wagon.

[00:13:13] A: Yeah. In matter of fact we were just looking at some old trophies that he had. They used to make gold watches and uh sometimes a wagon and different things that different firms put on in Brandon and the province. And we have two or three of these gold watches. And Gold metals that were made, and I don't know how these things are pure gold or not, but

they're certainly heavy, about two and a half inches in... in diameter. So, when gold was seven or eight hundred dollars and ounce, it was all just pretend and it would take some one in to see what they are really worth, but we never did.

[00:13:51] Q: [Laughs] Couldn't be replaced.

[00:13:52] A: Nope.

[00:13:53] Q: Well, you might have guessed my dad took that portable part off and mounted on the farm trucks. And put the trucks on the stoop wagon and he put the elevator part in the grainery. It was a twenty-foot leg, and we used that in the grainery until 1951.

[00:14:13] A: [Laughs] It must've been while I was away, because I don't remember nothing.

[00:14:17] Q: No. Yeah, it'd be by the time I had started school I think about 1918 he must've gone and bought that. [Pause] Well uh then as you mentioned earlier all the work with horses when umm did you get into tractor farming?

[00:14:36] A: Well I think it must have been about, oh when would that be about 19 [pause] 28 or around.

[00:14:43] Q: 27 I think, 28 yes.

[00:14:45] A: We uh started tractor farming. Not all together, but did a lot of work with tractors. And still kept the horses there, but uh that was about the time that people started to take interest in using tractors on the farm. They were old steel wheeled tractors and were pretty rough to ride but they were efficient and uh cheaper to run of course, then they are now, but everyone started to use tractors around that time.

[15 minutes passed]

[00:15:12] Q: I hear they all in our area they got McCormick 15-30s they just, you didn't ask at all the kind of tractor he got because they all bought the same thing there for a few years. And I think you had one of them?

[00:15:22] A: Yeah, a John Deere Model Ds.

[00:15:25] Q: They plowed, it came afterwards. But um when international came out with that 15-30 they started revolutionized farming in our district.

[00:15:36] A: Yes, it did. They were pretty good little tractor and uh I was just reading the other day for uh in 1951 which isn't so long ago, we were buying gasoline for 39.9 cents a gallon and today it costs about that much a litre.

[00:15:52] Q: Right just about the same.

[00:15:53] A: Yeah

[00:15:54] Q: Just about four and a half times as much. And uh, would you say a word about the crops that you grew and uh...?

[00:16:03] A: Well right after the war in the 1920s uh of course we weren't growing nearly as big crops because we weren't fertilizing but our costs were much less so we didn't have a overhead and we didn't have an input. And then uh it was kind of surprising too that after war wheat was uh at one time two dollars and ten cents a bushel. Which seems kind of surprising to me because we think that is a fairly decent price now for a bushel, but uh the question began in the thirties then we got into dry years and dusty years and uh the crops were pretty poor. We were troubled with grasshoppers and uh that's why I think that people call that period the dirty thirties. But uh after about 19, well 35 was the disaster year because it was so wet, but 36 was and this wet year, the grain all rusted. I don't know if you'd remember that Frank, but we burned a lot of the crops. Didn't even harvest.

[00:17:04] Q: Nearly all the wheat in our area was burned.

[00:17:07] A: Yeah it was that series wheat, that beer wheat that we put a lot of straw on it and it wouldn't ripen. But in 1936 it turned out we had dry year. And this land that you speak of must've been burned off and hauled off before. And that spring was where we were vulnerable for wind we had a lot of sand drifting in '36 and it further delayed crop, but after '36, gradually the crops began to get better. By 1940 the farmers were back in and in a better

position and started making money again. And uh actually, the early forties were uh a period where I think the farmers made more net revenue and did more in improving their buildings and fences and doing all these things that hadn't done in the previous fifteen years.

[00:17:58] Q: The uh worst of the [unclear] and depression was over by the spring of '37, although we didn't know that then, that uh things started to pick up.

[00:18:08] A: Yes, it gradually started to get better and uh, it grown different varieties of grain and uh the farmers really started to prosper about '38 then on to about '46 was a really good period on the farm. Another thing of course was that we didn't have the overhead we hadn't started to use much fertilizer and uh, weed sprays and uh... our net revenue was probably greater then compared to the input that any other period. [Pause] But uh... people began to uh, you couldn't buy much machinery at that time and it was hard to get cars, so we didn't have too much money to spend or have any place to spend it, so took the alternative and took it to improve homesteads and farms.

[00:19:00] Q: Well the thing was that during the depression, no one had any money to do any repairs on buildings or anything like that, so there was a big back log of work to be done, when they got a few dollars in their pockets.

[00:19:10] A: Yeah. Buildings were painted and fences fixed. Road allowances cleared up and [pause] yeah it was. As I always claimed that period, of six or seven years was the most prosperous years as far as net revenues that concerned that we ever had.

[00:19:26] Q: Right. And uh, what about uh harvesting these crops? You would be in the era of uh gas thrashing when you first started farming?

[19:40] A: Yes, uh the gas tractors were just coming in the early 30s, previous to that it had been a steam outfit that had been doing most of the thrashing in the big custom orders going around. The Anderson family had gone around with big steam outfit at that time.

[00:20:02] Q: You know, that my dad had his old thrashing records in a safe at home. It went back to 1908.

[00:20:13] A: Yeah.

[00:20:15] Q: And I never saw anything in that safe to much value, except this interesting thrashing records in any old fire insurance policies that had expired ten, fifteen years before. But when he died, we could not find those. I think he cleaned that safe out just a month or two before he died. I remember all these names of who he thrashed for and how many bushels and I can...

[00:20:38] A: See that would be interesting now wouldn't it?

[00:20:40] Q: I wish I had that book.

[00:20:41] A: Yeah. Do you remember when they used to have to stack the grains?

[00:20:44] Q: Oh that was before my time.

[00:20:47] A: Well when the custom workers were doing the thrashing, people would stack their grain. But waiting on them to thrash it into a sack afterwards. Sometimes they would at themselves until Christmas time doing up all these stacks. But uh we never knew, never had to worry about tough grain at that time, because everyone drew to the elevator at that time and never heard of it. Now the tough loads [pause], so was one thing we never had to worry about. And it wasn't such a problem storing grain because we could draw the grain straight out of the elevators, and it seems they could handle it all.

[00:21:27] Q: They uh, you would remember when [pause] the roads leading to Forest were just lined with teams of wagons hauling grain for the elevator and uh...

[00:21:40] A: Yes, it was quite a change, about it's about eighty bushels or eighty-five bushels was a pretty good load with the team wagon, and now big trucks haul four or five hundred bushels. Yes, I quite remember going over there. We used to have to draw about we'd make about four or five



trips a day from our farm to Forest with a load full of grain. So, it took about three or four grain teams to haul the grain away.

[00:22:03] Q: And uh, very little of the grain was stored on the farms?

[00:22:08] A: Very little. All in all we kept usually was enough feed for the livestock for the winter and seed for the next spring.

[00:22:15] Q: And today you'd wonder how the elevators handle that grain in that rush period wouldn't you?

[00:22:20] A: Yeah, although you know uh 25 bushels of wheat was a pretty fair profit in those days and 40 bushels of barely was a big crop and 50 bushels of oats was a big crop so there wasn't much grain to handle per acre then, like there is now a days.

[00:22:39] Q: Yes I uh was talking to Max [unclear] about a year ago he said that he ran at Mitchel's thrashing outfit for five years back in the late thirties. He said "I don't.. We Thrashed for five farmers I don't recall any of the men in those five years to do twenty bushels of wheat to the acre."

[00:22:58] A: Yeah. [pause] Well we weren't using fertilizer... and uh I can remember when we first started to use fertilizer and it was 65 dollars a tonne for it. And uh it wasn't an awful lot of it used and uh you could use it and it was a viable operation at that time. And uh of course now we are looking at three hundred or so per tonne for fertilizer. But uh it was a big

crop, 25 bushels and acre or 28 bushels and acre was a bumper crop of wheat.

[00:23:33] Q: What about barely?

[00:23:34] A: Well forty bushels an acre of barley. I don't think there was a much barely as much attention of barley perhaps as there is now. And 40 bushels of those was a good crop of barely. And about 50 bushels of oats was a good crop for oats. For quite a while the oats were fair to go because we had to feed the horse and cattle and pigs and stuff so uh...

[00:23:56] Q: Did you haul grain to the elevator when you were a kid?

[00:23:59] A: Oh yes.

[00:24:00] Q: That was what the kids do, it was what they started on.

[00:24:04] A: [Laughs] Yeah, that was. I can remember back though then too. Well before... before your father had the thrash now. [Chair moves] There were quite a few of them around they didn't have blowers on them. Do you remember when they had just buck the straw away behind?

[00:24:18] Q: Right.

[00:24:19] A: And uh, borrowing the straw pretty well though the thrash it at night, later on there'd be fires all over the country. It was quite spectacular sight to see all the straws then burn later on.

[00:24:30] Q: What do you remember about the elevators in Forest when you [pause] were hauling grain as a boy?

[00:24:36] A: Well first I remember those uh Western Canada elevator was there and the Lake of the Woods elevator was there and it didn't have uh the same kind of scales they have now you backed up to uh, a hopper there on the side of them and a lot of the grain was bagged. And you dumped the bags into those hoppers and uh it was an elevator inside them. And I suppose you weighed them inside but I don't remember that we had the grain afterwards. But uh quite a few people even then used to load their own cars. But uh that grain was... a lot was bagged before it was taken to the elevator or even taken to the granaries and I can't understand why they did it that way, but that's the way I suppose it was easy to do that than shoveling. Those old grain elevators they had been around the farms.

[00:25:23] Q: But there was a lot of men handling that grain too. There was a lot of hard work to it.

[00:25:28] A: Yeah, people were. Well everything was done by the hard ways seemed to me it was a handle on most two big bushels and a half of bags full wheat was uh was quite a exercise as in building up muscles.

[00:25:43] Q: Hmm Then they would get a little more modern in the elevators and you drove in the sheds and on to the scale.

[00:25:50] A: Yeah and the uh they had uh... dropped the wagons in the scales into the pits in the elevators and it seems to do now.

[00:26:01] Q: Who do you remember as being what they called in those days, grain buyers in Forest at that time?

[00:26:08] A: Ah well, about the earliest ones that I remember was the old Mr. Sandi Florside and he was working for Western Canada Plumber Mill at the grain elevator there. Uh. How old was the man [pause] called Doug McGregor boss for Lake of the Woods, he was killed over seas in first war. And uh one of the last ones was George Turner who finished up his general manager of the Manitoba Blue Elevators in Manitoba.

[00:26:38] Q: And then you got into a little change, and the combines came in?

[00:26:44] A: Yup. The first combine was a pull type combine. Uh it was Massey created it. I think it cost about 1700 dollars for that combine. And you used the swath crane with the binders, and lay it out to the row and tied the knot around and took the knot off and picked it up later then with the combines. But there's uh... there is quite a uh and advance because we would cut saw but some of it would bind it and stoop it and have to thrash it the old fashioned way. And uh some of it we had uh combined, we had combined as well. And uh for that time I was running a combine myself and I had to do as much with one combine and do it myself as the six or seven

or eight men could do with the threshing machines, so it wasn't very long until the thrashing machines went pretty well out of date. And everybody started combining.

[00:27:48] Q: How many men would there be on a thrashing gang in your early days?

[00:27:52] A: Well those big custom operators, like your father had and even bigger than that they had about six eight teams on stools and about four or five drawing grain and a team drawing water and uh a separator man and a fireman and an engineer that would be oh about fifteen or twenty men and some of the big outfits, there would be more than that. And uh they had uh I can remember when your father had a cooking caboose, that uh they cooked for the men. In some places, the housewives or farmers wife had to do all the cooking for that whole gang, and that was a hectic period for them.

[00:28:30] Q: Then it would rain and be boarding there and doing no work.

[00:28:32] A: Yeah, yeah it would be a few weeks work well there be no good crop to be threshing then

[00:28:36] Q: [Laughs] And then when did you get your first combine?

[00:28:41] A: Oh well I think the first combine that we first got was about 19 uh oh probably about 1930 [pause]. And as I say that, cost about 1700

dollars. And uh it did a lot of thrashing too. It is quite a difference now between a hundred thousand for a machine that does more work.

[00:29:05] Q: Right.

[00:29:06] A: There's more work to do.

[00:29:08] Q: There uh... They were a godsend for people during World War Two with the lack of help that you could take your crop off and replace the men that weren't available.

[00:29:19] A: That's right.

[Pause]

[30 minutes passed]

[00:30:53] Q: Now the uh... You had mentioned the fault plowing with the mole board plow, now that has gone out of style. But particularly in our district, would you comment further on the present day tilling methods.

[00:31:05] A: Yeah I think the reason and advantage with our present method is, we keep all the strong and stubble on the fields and work it in and it does away with that hazard of blowing and added nitrogen to the soil. So there is very little plowing to be done now a days and most of it is cultivated two or three times and uh is starting to use fertilizer of course which is made a complete change now in the farming practice and the yield we are getting. I don't know if we are any better farmers then we were

probably not as good but uh it certainly different then what it and uh we grow different crops. Nobody heard of growing grape or flax while... Well there was some flax growing but grape and all those different kinds of oil seed crops have coming in the picture since we started to use different methods of tillage and uh different markers for our grains and...

[00:32:06] Q: Now I heard it said when combines first came in some farmers thought the wonderful thing about that combine was that "I'd be able to burn that field off bare with that straw spread so nicely out", would you say a word about that and what's happened?

[00:32:23] A: Well the thing about that was that fielding alright, and a lot of people did it. But uh then they found it that uh they left land vulnerable for blowing in the spring but not many people now... uh they sometimes burn those rows out to get rid of that surplus straw because that particular rows by the straw but uh... by enlarge most fields are uh worked in the fall and straw and stubble are saved as I imagine and protects the soil from blowing and probably retains some of the moisture that used to run off.

[00:33:01] Q: The uh, most people now maintain a pretty good at trash cover and it is very fortunate that they do because uh...

[00:33:09] A: [coughs] Yes, they do! It was quite a spectacular site as I said before there we'd see all these fires in the hall and uh really destroying the fertility of the land rather than adding to it. [pause] Uh and then there is

the different varieties of grain of course that I, well actually we are growing more grain per acre by quite a bit than the land was new.

[00:33:42] Q: It was also feeling that uh we had too much trash there you wouldn't get your crop the next year but we have over come that haven't we?

[00:33:51] A: Yeah. Yeah that was one of the other things that we talked about we couldn't get enough moisture in, but trying to work stubble in the moisture got away of course I hadn't moved out.

[00:34:10] Q: Now Alex, you had a second career, besides your career as a farmer in that you were very closely associated with the Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba and the Manitoba Winter Fair for many years. And subsequently you became the general manager of both those institutions. Would you give us a bit of a brief outline of the history of those fairs?

[00:34:37] A: Yes, well my peel or my father was very interested in exhibition or winter fair and uh he was in it. The first fair; was held in 1882 and that was a stallion show held on the grounds where the city, old city hall used to be. And they held the first fait there was in the fall, in October. And the next year they bought land up in the south side of the exhibition grounds are now. They bought 35 acres there and had more land donated to them and uh moved up there for the second fair in 1882-3 And uh at that time it was strictly agricultural show, although we did have side shows and midway.



Uh. My dad was one of the first directors on that fair or on the fairs and was president of it in 19... 1896. And uh we had more or less interest in the fairs and uh all right from the start and did exhibit horses and uh cattle, and pigs and believe it or not poultry! At that time for quite a few years at that. And I became a... kind of brought up on fair activities from the time I was a small lot boy, I could go in there and ride around on a pony calling out the different classes that were going to be judged. Yeah so, I had quite a background in pure business and so I could start, and thought that is just one of those ways of life. I was a director to start with in 1935.

[00:36:30] Q: This is the exhibition?

[00:36:31] A: The exhibition yeah. And ah the winter fair started in 1908, the first winter fair, but it didn't really become going until 1912 or 13.

[00:36:43] Q: Would that be when all the old Wheat City arena was built?

[00:36:46] A: The Wheat City arena was built at that time, and the first boys and girls calf feeding competition was starting at that time and Jimmy McGregor had a lot to do with that, along with a few others interested in juniors doing the work. But uh... [pause] both of those fairs were probably more agriculturally oriented than they are now because, well we had machinery shows, the old steam tractors or engines and the old-fashioned separators and plows of course or something that the farmers came to see, all those different things we used at that time, and uh had horse races. I can

vaguely remember having a... having a plowing match over on the land just West across from 18<sup>th</sup> street there from the exhibition grounds. All that didn't seem to last very long, but I can remember having a... holding a... having a plowing match held out there, that would probably be about 1910 or in that neighbourhood.

[00:37:56] Q: Was this in connection with the exhibition, at the same time?

[00:38:00] A: The whole time it was exhibition, yeah.

[00:38:03] Q: It was part of the exhibition?

[00:38:03] A: Yeah.

[00:38:04] Q: Ain't that interesting.

[00:38:04] A: Yeah. It uh, I don't think many people remember that but I do remember. Oh, on that land, right across from the exhibition grounds. I think probably maybe one of the exhibition grounds held certainly in this area. But uh [coughs], in 19...12 was the year that uh... the government would sponsor the Dominion Fair in different places each, every now and again. 1912 was supposed to be held in Brandon. So uh, it was a big activity then, we got one hundred thousand dollar grant from the government to put on a Dominion fair and the buildings previously had gone up in domes in the South-West corner. Which is the parking lot now, and it used to be old buffalo pens up there, if you remember that. We built a new grand stand it started in 1912 but they didn't have it finished in time for that exhibition so

the Dominion Fair was held in 1913 and it was a big affair. Probably biggest crowds at it. And it was pretty well all agriculture orient, for your interest to the agriculture people we got people to come to it from oh umm... from larger area than what seem to come now. Of course, they had to drive in of course, with horse and buggy, but uh that was one of the big fairs. And uh, the fairs went on pretty good from there, quite a number of years with... with farm machinery shows and bigger livestock shows, all class of livestock grain and home cooking and ladies work and it uh... I think it interest more people from the country to come in. Of course, 1957 was a big year, but that was because it was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary ag show.

[00:40:11] Q: Right.

[00:40:12] A: And it was a big fair. It was probably more money in it than any other at that time. It was all cars and that. But fairs all over gradually changed a little but since then and livestock exhibits themselves have changed because people began to get interested because in utility value of livestock more than just a show class. And uh I think that they have improved, although in these last few years uh for some reason rather... uh perhaps they've gone too far the other way, it is more of a picnic style of them and people are prob... well people are probably not as interested in livestock because all the farmers would have a good team of horses that they would want to bring in with their neighbours. And uh gradually that uh died out because it wasn't, or most farmers didn't have livestock but uh, you

know Frank, I think people don't realize what fairs were set up for the first place, why they got government grants. It wasn't to distribute prize money but it was to demonstrate and educate and producing better products of the farm and home and the factories and the house and uh... to demonstrate to not only the exhibitors themselves but to the visitors that came to the fair that this kind of livestock should be grown for utility value rather than just the looks. So that there's been quite a change in the last 100 years in the end fairs are checked of what it really is and I think that a lot of people just don't realize that... that you got to keep reminding boards that this is business end too, and prove these different things rather than we have failed. And different methods of competing.

[00:42:21] Q: Is there a place you can go and see what your neighbour is doing and learn from what is being done on the...

[00:42:27] A: This is correct. To demonstrate that we are trying to get people to realize that they can see these animals and that this is a winning value of putting on competitive classes, that maybe I should be getting a bull like that or a bull like that.

[00:42:45] Q: Right.

[00:42:46] A: And take them home to improve my own livestock. That is what fairs are for in the first place. But uh I think that they have. They have done a lot of good over the years and that very same one thing that they

have improved is quality of farm products and other things too, like machine products. And that is really the only excuse.

[00:43:11] Q: Would you say that the fairs before World War One and for a few years after that two of the big attraction for rural people were the horse show and the harvesting machinery show?

[00:43:24] A: Well I think that so true and uh this is the kind of thing that... that kind of worrisome to me is that we... we're trying to get away from that now and not concentrating on demonstrating to people and showing the best way to do these... to do these things, that this country so adapted to.

[00:43:48] Q: I think what you're saying to me means that the problem that the fairs have today is they got to concentrate more on what is going to attract rural people into these grounds?

[00:44:02] A: Yes you know, I think that's true whether there are so many different attractions in the city that time of year people are... are having hard places to go. But back in the those days, everybody went to the fair. You know, when we kept, when I was in charge of the fair there and I expect that this is done before we would take uh a survey at the gate and ask them where came from. And about 65 percent of the people that came to the fair were from the country.

[00:44:31] Q: Right

[00:44:32] A: And now I would expect that it balances the other way. That people would come up there from the cities for recreation and a little excitement riding on the different... the devices on the midways. Uh. I think that fairs have lost uh quite a bit of their educational value just by that one thing an uh... I blame if I blame anybody, I'd blame the fair boards for forgetting that this isn't their job, that their job is to uh... make agriculture better business to be in. Whether it is raising horses or cattle or livestock or growing grain or whatever. And as you mentioned uh the machinery shows have lost their appeals cause of that was the place to go see them running, and see the developments in agriculture machinery.

[45 minutes passed]

[00:45:26] Q: I can remember when, in my time when there'd be a down towards the south end where the grounds are there'd be a line hundreds of yards long with uh the um... different companies displaying their thrashing machinery, all lined up with their tractors and it was a great drawing card for farmers.

[00:45:46] A: Yeah and they even uh they used to have them running, demonstrating how they did go and after that when the combines started coming in everybody was interested in seeing the developments in combines and even other fertility machinery we were all interested in going and seeing what was going... what was happening or what was likely to be on the

markets next year or so. So I think the fairs had a... had a more of a educational value at that time as perhaps now a days.

[00:46:17] Q: You mentioned the Dominion Fair in 1913, do you know we found in our house here a few years ago, a ticket which was an admission for one lady to the Dominion Fair of 1913.

[00:46:30] A: Yeah. Yes there are quite a lot of those things that show up, people that kept them and there were interesting. We have quite a few of those things around. And people saying in, and you know perhaps being interested in having kept them in a closet or some old cupboard or up in the attic someplace. And uh they are interesting too, uh but I don't think I they hold that Dominion Fair anymore because I supposed likely that fairs are getting big enough grants usually, and case in order to have bankers. By the way the that 1913 was one of the last years that the old Winnipeg Exhibition was held and they were sort of in limbo after that for a number of years. We had horse fellow at the Winnipeg fair and came up to the Dominion Fair in Brandon.

[00:47:26] Q: That was quite a fair while it lasted. But it had a short lifespan.

[00:47:30] A: The Winnipeg one?

[00:47:31] Q: Yes.

[00:47:32] A: Yes, and it was a good fair too, they uh... it was quite an area around Winnipeg and then down south in the Red River Valley that supported and they had good farms down there and had a quite a lot of good cattle herds down in that area of Manitoba. But uh, and there were quite a lot of traveling herds came out from Ontario at about that time and some of them from the States that came up from there.

[00:47:57] Q: They had a... a competition there for it too, what was it called? The uh Farm Motors Competition? Where they had different companies competed for the uh breaking prairie sod with steam engines and uh... fuel economy tests and uh...

[00:48:12] A: Yeah. And all those kinds of things. And you know it was after all that, that was what the fair was all about.

[00:48:17] Q: Yes.

[00:48:20] A: But uh... oh I suppose uh, but times change and people are thinking different. And I don't know maybe people go to the fair now for... for the recreational value rather than to learn something different.

[00:48:42] Q: Now Alex, I like to get some comments on the... some Winter Fairs of the past, in the era perhaps between the two World Wars and for a few years afterwards. Our transportation has changed so much, the mobility of people umm what was the feature of the winter fairs in those days?



[00:49:06] A: Well the winter fair was uh actually a horse show and a steer feeding, for classes for uh groups of steers and carb load groups. But the horse end of it was really the thing that drew people because people were interested in in raising horses and uh they came in to develop into a sort of a stallion show for people who came in hire their stallions for the next year. And that had a great influence on the horse population because in place of using broncos and [unclear] for power they were grazing their own good... good breads of horses and uh well the people from close in you would think would come in on horse or team or team and cutter and even sleigh. They ran special trains from certain areas for the Winter Fair, and the Summer Fair too as far as that's concerning. Uh, going back to summer fair I can remember a special train ran from downtown to the fair grounds every hour, bringing people back and forward.

[00:50:14] Q: This was on the railway?

[00:50:15] A: On the railway, yeah. Uh... they would load up at where the old CNR used to be and run a train up to the gates of the exhibition and uh but from the country people did come in by train for the winter and a lot would stay over night and but the train service was pretty good they had trains, special trains for going back and forward. We used to arrange that, partly through the Winter Fair board with railways to special days say from Glenboro or Hamiota or someplace that would have enough people to come and again without too much harsh wind.

[00:50:54] Q: Now the... the Livery Barn had a roaring business during fair week? With the people that were able to drive in?

[00:51:00] A: Oh yes, uh yes, they did. They had a big business and well it had been pretty cold. I would imagine the liquor store did fairly well with business at that time too. Well I am not so sure about that, and uh... sometimes we seemed to get some bad storms at that time too. People would be stormed in too.

[00:51:22] Q: Right.

[00:51:24] A: Roads weren't built up to what they are now but uh...

[00:51:29] Q: What about the pig show at the winter fair? That was quite more of a hog competition than a bred sow sale?

[00:51:36] A: Yes, the pig show was good. We had uh... we had a big class of pigs and bred sow sales, and boar sales every show. And Uh people would come in and buy a sow or whatever you'd want but it was a good play for the pig to come over. And it was good, it was quite a feature for the fair. And of course, the bull sales were good then too. And the stallion shows where sales were good. I can remember one year, they had 125 stallions in that old arena at one time for one class. It was absolutely full of stallions. And they were brought in and put on display and then rented out or hired out to different districts and a there it was sort of a market place for ... was a service for stallions

[00:52:31] Q: Well that would be a tremendous service to the farmers in the south there was a place for them where they could rent stallions for their clubs or buy or sell stallions and...

[00:52:44] A: It was a great thing for Brandon and all those stallions most of them were kept in area, some were kept or a lot were kept here for winter...

[00:52:49] Q: Right.

[00:52:50] A: In the different barns.

[00:52:55] Q: And uh [pause] what about some of the fairs, that um has there always been a Winter Fair every year?

[00:53:10] A: Yes, I don't think they mentioned this, the [stutters] county took over the Winter Fair buildings at the time of the war and used it for manning depot sometimes and had used it for prisons of war or barracks for a while but we used to hold a show downtown and some of the... the uh machinery warehouses and got a hold of that on a smaller scale of course for those years when the buildings weren't available the Winter Fair kept going. But I don't think they ever missed it, there was some kind of show even in war time.

[00:53:51] Q: And after the war there was a year... I think it was '52 where the foot and mouth disease broke out at in Saskatchewan, was the fair cancelled that year?

[00:54:02] A: No, um I believe that they uh... the cattle show might have been cancelled. And all we were going to Toronto to the Royal at that time with the pigs. And they wouldn't take the stuff from Manitoba or steers down there on account of foot and mouth disease, [stutters] it was kind of a disaster that year.

[00:54:20] Q: It was a disaster. Well [pause] now we talked a lot about how the Winter Fair and the Exhibition grew over the years, but I am interested to learn when this fair first became known as the Province Exhibition of Manitoba.

[00:54:49] A: Well we have quite a competition with Portage at that time. Portage wanted to... actually Portage was an older fair than Brandon, and they wanted to have the title of Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba. But through some government pull in 1919 the Provincial Exhibition of Brandon was changed to the West Agricultural Arts Association over the name, which is Royal Exhibition of Manitoba.

[00:55:13] Q: That would be considered quite a step forward it would qualify for some more grants.

[00:55:19] A: And incidentally they got a little higher, more grants too.

[00:55:22] Q: Right. Now, many people admire the beautiful park-like area that is known as exhibition, known as Exhibition Park. Would you say a word too about who should get the credit for uh making it as it is?

[00:55:42] A: Yes, and that is interesting topic uh Frank uh, because Brandon was noted for having the nicest exhibition park in all western Canada. And the credit is due to Mr. Patmore who is an agriculturalist here in Brandon, who planted all the tree up there. And took care of them too until they got started, so there should be an awful lot of credit it going to Mr. Patmore and incidentally his family who left here for doing that job and doing it so well.

[00:56:12] Q: They have served Brandon well that family.

[00:56:16] A: Yes.

[00:56:16] Q: Now, over the years you must have had special attractions for uh different special occasions. What are some of the uh special attractions that you remember?

[00:56:31] A: Well the earliest one was balloon uh flights and they blew up a balloon and it was one of these big affairs, you know and was flying around the city and I can remember one year when um people would help hold the balloon down with ropes until they got it inflated enough to rise. And a fellow got his foot or his arm caught in the ropes and it took him up into the air and uh nobody noticed until he was off the ground of course so that he couldn't get out. So, uh it cost an awful amount of concentration because uh how would we to get him down?

[00:57:06] Q: You can always go up!

[00:57:09] A: [Laughs] Yeah. But anyways the fellow that was in the balloon looked after it. He uh flighted it enough that he finally landed in a field far away and was the fellow was bound to get out of this entitlement. I would expect likely that he had a few nervous moments afterwards so that he could go over it. And in 19 um... 16 uh, Katherine Stinson put on a demonstration of flying, it was the first people had actually seen anyone flying on an airplane over in this area and she put on demonstrations here which was quite an interest to the people. And another interesting or wild card, was the Musical Rides.

[00:58:00] Q: That would be the RCMP?

[00:58:02] A: Well the first ones were held by the Strathcona Horse or the Fort Garry Horse which were trained in Winnipeg. This was before the war, and they would come up and put on demonstrations. Not quite the same as the musical rides but dressing them horse back and doing drills or one thing and another. And in 1957 in the year of the anniversary uh, we had the Musical Ride, the RCMP Musical Ride, and that was really uh, that is what made '57 one of the biggest fairs that I've ever held.

[00:58:33] Q: Was that the occasion of Brandon's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

[00:58:38] A: The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary yes. So it, it was a real good, we were sold out the grandstand sold out for the performance for that for days ahead, you couldn't get a seats on the grandstand.

[00:58:52] Q: Now you mentioned the grandstand, the grandstand show was in itself over the years was quite the attraction there had been some pretty grand performers here?

[00:59:05] A: Yeah we did have some good performers and it was a good show and uh, I think that people looked a little bit panicky when the T.V. started to come, people would see all the things on the T.V. could. I don't think that would've worked out because I think that the grandstand would still be an attraction. Of course, we horse races too would spend an afternoon, which was an attraction in itself, but I think that is something that fair has lost that the grandstand and racetrack and those grandstand shows. We had a good some good attractions we had, people had a lot of fun too. You know we had some good times and uh you know different type of variety shows and uh I think it drew a lot of people in. Well we could prove there was a lot of people because there would be a sellout every night and on Wednesday and Thursday we held two shows and they'd both be sold out and we would have to put seats out in front of it to accommodate people could see it. So I think that it was a mistake to... to uh jump the gun and uh say that the grandstand attractions never been more good, than all these good actors on T.V. cause they were still going to the live shows.

[1:00:10] Q: To me there was something about the atmosphere, that evening grandstand show. On a beautiful summer evening.

[1:00:16] A: Yeah.

[1:00:17] Q: That you couldn't get anywhere else.

[1:00:20] A: Yeah, I... It was a, well it proved that it was a one of the biggest money makers that the show, was the grandstand show. And uh of course it was built in 1913 and uh it was torn down last year, because uh it needed some repairs uh, the brick work was beginning to needing fixing and the roof was needing fixing, but it could've been done for the border of the price of building a new grandstand. The new grandstand now pretty well going t reach the Provincial Exhibition without an awful lot of help. So, and even the racetrack was going to cost a lot of build up again, but uh the light horse people, the harness horse people were looking for homes and they were barely allowed to...

### **End of Interview**

[Talking stops at 1:01:06]

[Tape ends at 1:01:10]