

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

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Tell us a little about your background in Alberta.

The reason I'm here is because my great grandparents homesteaded from the States to this area in 1907. When they came to this area it was not Drumheller, it was called Greentree Crossing. They lived for a period of time in Carstairs for the first winter. Their property was just up on the hill in an area called Verdon Valley, about 11 miles northeast of Drumheller. My grandfather, his job to earn some money for his family was he hauled in supplies for the settlers until they got their own sod home built and moved the family in. Then he started breaking the land and farming it. My grandmother was one of the children that came with my great grandparents. When she married when she was 16, she just moved on about another 2 miles from where her parents lived. Of course that's where my beginning came from, because I was born in the Drumheller Hospital. I always lived

with my grandparents. I was born in 1941. In 1948 my grandmother's father came to live with us, so we moved into town because he was 92 years of age. We lived in north Drumheller. I grew up and went to school. In 1955 I met my husband, who was from East Coulee. We were married in 1957 here in East Coulee at the United Church. My husband was a coalminer.

What was life like as a coalminer's wife?

Being a coalminer's wife was a very hard life. I'm talking back in the days there wasn't many amenities. We had electricity, and if you had that you thought you were really something. We had coal stoves, no running water, an outhouse. Life was hard. In the era when I married my husband, the mines were already starting to go out. So they did not work steady. My first introduction as soon as I got married is we had to go look for the light. If the light was burning it meant there was work the next day. If the light wasn't burning, it meant there was no work. Consequently if there was no work there was no money. I can remember the first fall we came here. Everyone had taken in their gardens. The ladies were all very kind and they said to me I could go in and take what was left and can it. Thank goodness I did. Because in December the mines shut down and they did not open again until that fall. So consequently, if you can visualize it, here we are in a little 3 room tiny house. Thank goodness the coal bin was full of coal, but it didn't last that long. We had no money, so the canning I had done came in very handy. My husband used to go up in the hills and hunt rabbits, and that's how we got our meat. So life was not easy. You had to watch. We had a wonderful grocery man here and he would let us charge groceries. But you knew eventually they all had to be paid for. There was no room for

luxuries. But in those days, you all visited and kept each other company. None of us had more than the other. None of us thought it was hard. It was just a way of life.

The one thing about being a miner's wife is you knew you looked after the home and made sure that home was comfortable for your husband when he came home. You made sure he was fed the best you could possibly feed him. You were there as a moral support, because it was a very dangerous job. You knew every time your husband went to the mine, he might not come home. Your husband knew it as well. There was a lot of superstition in those days that I don't think we have as much now. They always said, a miner's wife never went near the mine because that was bad luck for her husband. So I never got near a mine. You knew if you heard sirens it meant there'd been a serious accident in the mine. You just waited and hoped and prayed that somebody didn't come knocking on your door. It's a hard way to live day after day. And it's just as hard, when you have no money coming in and you have your husband at home. He wants to provide for his family but he can't because there's no way he can. There's no resources for him to go to.

Another part that went with the coal mining that my background didn't prepare me for is that coalminers, because they worked hard and it was dangerous, they did a lot of drinking. So consequently they made a lot of their own liquor or they patronized the hotels. This seemed to be the way of the coalminer. If they weren't working hard they were drinking hard, and that's the way it was.

In the winter we went skating. You'd be amazed the amount of tobogganing that went on in these hills here. But we didn't have sleighs, we had cardboard and things like that that

we came down on. There was dances in the winter. In the summer there was baseball. It was simple and good entertainment. It was fellowship being together with other people.

You lived in the Drumheller area at a time when the coalmines were closing. What was that like?

Coalmining slowly declined, and you could see what it was doing to the people. I think the first hard part of it was when you seen the first family move away to another coalmine. Everybody talked about it at great lengths. The next thing you knew there was a couple more families going, then a couple more families going. It left these empty houses. It was bad enough that the people went, because in those days you knew you wouldn't see these people again. Because people didn't travel back and forth like they do now. To see the families go, and when you think back to their possessions, no one had that much. They were very small amount of possessions. But they would leave with whatever they had. They were going off to another coalmine somewhere else. We left, but my father in law didn't leave. He was one of the ones that was here right to the end. We came back to visit, and you drive down the street and here's all these empty houses that used to be full of mothers and fathers and children. All of a sudden there's nothing. Then the sad part about it was there started to be a lot of fires. These houses somehow started to burn. That made it look worse yet. There's nothing worse than a pile of burnt rubbish, it's worse than an empty house. Word would leak back, well this family was doing fine down at Coleman or this one was doing fine up at Grande Cache. But it was a whole new way. We ended up mining back up in Canmore, and my inlaws moved there. It was a whole different way of life again than here. Canmore was further along. You had more amenities and the dwellings were nicer to live in. In some ways the surrounding

environment was a bit nicer than here. In those days the hills here used to be very dry and brown. They weren't green and lush. And you get to the mountains and you've got all these beautiful trees. But the coalmining was no different. In many ways I used to detest it. My husband would go out the door, and it seemed there was sirens more often than there wasn't. You'd see what would happen the minute a man was killed or hurt, the effects on the family. Consequently you knew yourself that could be you at any time as well. So you lived with this fear all the time.

Tell us a bit about the lives of women in a coalmining town.

There's a few things I look back, they sound funny. Women had to make their own life. They worked hard, they cooked, they cleaned, and they looked after the families. They were very proud to keep good, clean homes. When we came to East Coulee we lived with my in-laws until we could find a little house to live in. I couldn't believe it, the first Sunday night my mother-in-law says we're going to do the laundry now. I said, what do you mean, we do it on Monday mornings. Everybody did laundry on Monday mornings. It was a sacred ritual. My mother-in-law didn't speak English very well. There was a Hungarian lady across the alley, and her son owned one of the grocery stores. She was noted as having the cleanest laundry, doing the best baking, crocheting the finest doilies. All miners' wives could do crochet or embroidery, because they had to do these things in order to make their homes nice. My mother-in-law proceeds to tell me that this lady had always had her laundry on the line first thing Monday morning, and she was going to beat this lady. That meant we had to do the laundry on a Sunday night and leave it in tubs of cold water. Then we got up at 4 o'clock in the morning to run it through the wringer, to hang it on the line so we could beat this lady on the line first thing on a Monday morning.

It was a competition between the women here. Just like it was a competition when spring came. They worked hard, but in some ways they were busy bodies, but they were funny busy bodies. They kept track of who got their windows cleaned the fastest, and who washed their curtains, and how often everybody washed their curtains. And you think back upon this, but it was part of their life. It showed they were clean and proud of their homes. These were just some of the things that went on here in East Coulee. Monday morning was a ritual wash day for everyone. God help you if you ever washed clothes on any other day. Tongues wagged like you wouldn't believe. It had to be Monday mornings. They took it very serious.

A woman never went out with her hair in curlers or she was talked about for weeks. On Saturday night at the dances, as funny as it sounds, when women got dressed up we all had seams up the back of our legs. If those seams weren't straight, you were talked about for weeks here. Or if your dress didn't hang right. But these are the only things they had, they didn't have other things to occupy their mind. So in their world they were all working to be perfectionists. It's hilarious when I think back now of how it all was. Also part of being a miner's wife, you've gotta remember there was little money. They needed to make things to beautify their homes. They crocheted. There was very few women who didn't crochet and knit and quilt. Some of it was a necessity in the home, but also it made their homes look much nicer. These women worked all day very hard, because it is very hard to cook meals and keep a coal stove going and haul coal in and haul ashes out and haul water in and haul the slop out. But everyone has a bit of creativity within them, and this was a way they could release some of the creativity by making beautiful doilies or crocheting table cloths or knitting articles that their husbands and

children needed. It was a major part of their life. It was a way they could escape the drudgery. If they could put a piece of crochet out on their table, the table looked much nicer and so did the home. So it gave them another insight, even though life was hard and times were tough and everybody was poor. This I think was a great release for the women of that time, and helped them get through things when it looked pretty bleak.

What's your husband's background?

My husband is a true blue Ukrainian. What I mean is he was born and raised in Ukraine until the age of 12, when he immigrated to this country. He comes from a very sad background. Him and his family lived in a city called Nicolai. We took a trip back just a few years ago and found out the whole history. Seen the house where his great grandfather, his grandfather, his father and he himself was born. He was in this house until he was 2-1/2, and then they moved to a small village. We visited this little house where he lived in the village, and of course I'm talking about the 2nd world war when the Germans came and drove them out of their home. My husband and in-laws have told me many times about how they came and all they were allowed was a cow and a cart, and whatever they could put in that cart. There was 5 little children and a man and wife to leave. They only got so far until the Germans took everything away and put them in boxcars and eventually they ended up in Germany. My husband never had a home from the age of 4 until 12 when he came to Canada. When they arrived in Canada, sad to say there was only 4 of them, the mother and father and 2 boys, one of which was my husband. The other 3 children died during wartime. So they came into Canada to Drumheller in September of 1948, and ended up here in East Coulee in 1949 and purchased a home and made their first real home in all those years. It was pretty

traumatic for him and his family coming here and all that happened. They came here to start a new life, which they did. They lost during the war, 2 girls and a boy. But they had 2 more girls and a boy after they got here. So it put the family back to 5 again. My husband didn't get an education, like most kids, because at age 12 you had to start in at grade one. So he didn't last in school very long because he was too big. He started work at the age of 14 on a farm, and worked there for one whole summer season. Then from that time he worked on the railroad until he was old enough to get into the mine. Then he worked in the mine from then on. That's how my husband's family got to be here and in the situation the way it was.

Tell us a bit about your house.

When you think back about a coal mining town, one thing there was not was big houses. They were all very little houses. There were reasons for this. Number one, it took money to heat it, to buy coal. So they kept their houses small. I lived in a little house that would've been approximately 400 sq ft. In that house we had 3 rooms. One was a front room, one was a bedroom, and one was the kitchen. Our front room, we were able to buy a second hand chesterfield, I can remember for \$5. The rest of my furniture was nothing but apple boxes and orange boxes. Those were very plentiful in those days. We used to cover them with material or plastic. I was very fortunate my grandmother did a lot of crocheting. So I put a doily over it. Then we all grew plants, because you took something like that and put a doily and put a plant on it, it all looked pretty nice. You could fill up the whole room like that. You were very proud this is what you'd done. In the kitchen, all I had was a coal stove. I had a cupboard but it would be just half a cupboard. There

would be no top part of the cupboard. I would say this cupboard would only be about 6 feet long, and a table and chairs, very small. Then for the wash area where the water pail stood, because orange box crates were 2 sections and were higher than the apple boxes. So I thought it was pretty cute, I sat 3 together. I put an orange crate and then an apple crate so it was at one level, then it took a dip down and then it came up high at the orange crate level again. I had the water pail in one and the wash basin in the centre. Then the soap dish would be on the other one. You covered this all with plastic. Inside these boxes created shelves, and that's where you put stuff away. Your soap, and of course we all had slop pails. You wanted to hide them, so it got hid in the apple box part where the wash basin was. That was the kitchen, there was nothing else. Then in the bedroom, believe it or not my husband couldn't afford a bed. So our in-laws gave us a single bed. We slept on a single bed. We had a single bed, a dresser, and a crib for our baby. There was a bit of a closet. But we had very few clothes, so you didn't need much room to put anything away. When that was all in the room, you only had enough room you walked in, you turn around, you walk back out. There was no more room. That's how people lived. But when you consider it cost money to heat things, you kept your houses as small as possible, because then you didn't have to buy too much coal.

What mines and buildings were in the town at the time?

When I was here there was the Murray, the Atlas, the Crown, the Monarch. No there was 2, because there was the old and the new Atlas. There was 5 here. So at the time I married my husband there was 5 mines in operation here. One was the Murray, that he worked in, and that's the one that we looked for the light all the time. Then they had just created a new Atlas mine, but there was also the old Atlas, and they were both in existence. Then

there was the Monarch and the Crown. And at the time between all of these mines and all the people from what I can remember, there was 5,000 people lived in this small area. In those days on Main Street, which now you look at and there's nothing, we used to start up at the east end of Main Street and we had the big store that sold all kinds of things. Then you got onto what was actually the main block. On the one side of the street we had another grocery store. We had a post office, we had a drugstore, we had a barbershop, we had a beauty salon, and we had a big bakery. Then we had a few houses. Then we had another grocery store and then we had a restaurant and a jewellery store. That completed it on that side of the block. Across the street we had a hotel that was across from the grocery store. Then we had a garage, then we had a shoemaker. Then there was a few houses, and then it was the big Hungarian Hall. And a few more houses. That would take care of that block. When you got into the next block, on the south side of the street was the school. Next to the school was a grocery store, then it was the show hall, as we referred it . Then there was another store. And across the street on the north side was the Paint Store. Then there was a Chinese restaurant and a pool hall and another grocery store. Then the rest of it was houses. But there was actually 5 hotels going at that time between Monarch Mine and over in this area.

Well you had to watch. The Murray was right behind us here. They had a wire that was quite high, and it was just one single light bulb. There was certain places you could stand here in town, and you could see it. Some people had to walk a few blocks to see it. But we were lucky, we could see it.

Where did the union fit into town life?

When it came to the union, back in those days the unions, how can I say, they were working very hard to make the conditions better for the miners. But they were have a very hard struggle to do it as well. Anything to improve it, the miners would go along with. But the miners were working so hard to make a living and cope with the mining, that they were hoping and praying that this union that came in could really help things and make things better for them. To make the work better and the living conditions better. So they put a lot of hope into it. Some were very strong union people. But not all of them were, because they weren't really familiar. We're going back many years where unions didn't have strong footholds like they did in the '50s and '60s. Consequently it was like they put their faith into somebody that they hoped and prayed could really change things for them.

What popular entertainments do you remember?

They brought in regular movies. The theatre showed them, and it was really something because to my recollection, the same movie ran all week and it got changed every Saturday. You gotta remember the show hall wasn't that big, so consequently it could run all week and the same people didn't get in, because it wasn't that large of a facility. Nothing was open here on a Sunday.

There was always dances. They had the Hungarian Hall and they had the Community Hall. There was always a dance or something going on. And there used to be a lot of suppers in those days. Like a turkey supper. You could pay a couple of dollars and go have a turkey supper, then have a dance afterwards. There was entertainment. For instance, at the Hungarian Hall a lot of the ethnic people would come and do some Hungarian dancing, put on a performance for the people. They did the same in the

community hall as well. Dancing and even live plays were in this valley. It was amazing how much of this type of thing there was.

We used to walk down the sidewalks and the sidewalks were wooden. The thing that got me, in Drumheller we didn't have paved streets, they were gravelled. But when it really rained and the snow ran off in the spring, it got pretty bad. But we could get along with rubbers. Well when we moved to East Coulee everybody wore gumboots in the spring. You had to, because you sunk in mud right past over your ankles. The only part that had a wooden sidewalk was just the one main block. In the spring everybody used to try to walk on the wooden sidewalk to stay out of the mud. There was people everywhere. It's hard to believe now when you look at it and think, how could it have been? All of this, just think the amount of people that involved.

Was there a sense of solidarity among the miners' families?

Oh heavens yes. And in those days what was nice, if anyone needed something, there was always somebody that seen you were in need, if they had it they'd help you out. If somebody took sick or died, everybody was there for support and rallied around the people. There was no such thing as a family went through this by themselves. There was all kinds of people to help them through. The thing that was really prominent in those days, anything happened everybody was taking food immediately to that house. Regardless of what it was, people were cooking and taking things to that house so they didn't have to worry about it at a time of catastrophe.

They didn't in Canmore, because Canmore was a bit different. It's funny now. My husband forgot that he was taken directly to the hospital. He was hurt the 23rd of December 1964. I said to him, I'll never forget the day. You never wanted a fire boss to

bang on your door, because it was always the fire boss that brought you the news. When he came and told me that my husband and his worker had been taken to the Canmore Hospital, they'd had an accident in the mine. the first thing I thought was: is he still alive? How bad is it? What's happened? My husband forgot the hospital part. He thought he came home and then went to the hospital. But the thing is, my husband is on so much medication from that accident that happened in 1964, it's had a major effect on our life ever since. Out of that accident has resulted 4 major back surgeries, which just complicated things and created other problems within his body. So we've had to live with this ever since.

A lot of people went to Canmore from here. In fact the majority of the people went to Coleman or Canmore from here.

What was the impact of shift work in the mines on your life?

One part about your husband working in the mine that you learn that you have to adjust to very rapidly is the shift work. There was day shift and there was afternoon shift and there was midnight shift. Day shift, if I can recall, was from 7 in the morning till 4 in the afternoon. Afternoon shift was from 4 until midnight, and then midnight was from midnight until the 7 o'clock shift again. The day shift was fine, you could get along with that. That's the way we're meant to be is working in the day and you sleep at night. But one thing though, when your husband was day shift, you got up early in the morning and made sure you got the fires going and made him a good breakfast so he had a good breakfast to leave the house with. You made him his lunch and put him out the door. When he came back in at night, you made sure you had a good hot meal on that table. If he was afternoon shift, it was the same way. You made sure you fed him a good hot meal

and had his lunch pail ready before he left. But you also made sure you had a good warm lunch, say some soup if it was the winter, and something for him to eat when he came in at midnight. And you've gotta remember, he worked till midnight, so he wouldn't get in till after midnight. If you had children going to school, it meant that you were up till after midnight with your husband. Then you're back up early in the morning because you've gotta get this house all ready for these little children to get ready for school that day. It's vice versa. There were the 3 shifts. This is the way they were. You served your husband a hot meal before he went out the door, and you had something ready for him when he came in the door. But if you had other family, it meant you had to look after them as well. So your job wasn't just a day job, and once supper was over you were done. It didn't work that way, because of the shift work. If your husband worked midnights, it meant you kept pretty quiet in the daytime because this man needed his rest in order to work again that day. So shift work was very trying on everybody in the family, especially if you had a tiny baby that was not well. You walked the floor lots, I'll tell you. But you couldn't spend all your time walking, because there was lots of other work to be done.

A typical lunch for my husband would be some sandwiches and some fruit. You had to watch what you packed. In the summer it was OK, but in the winter the mine was so cold the food froze. So you wanted to make sure there was food that he could still get some substance from even though it was frozen. You always packed a good thermos of hot coffee or hot tea. If you could afford it, you always tried to give your husband a piece of fresh fruit in with his lunch. That was the typical lunch. But I know I've heard of the bachelors saying they used to just take a half a loaf of bread, as it was, break it off, and just grab a piece of sausage and an onion. And that would be their lunch in the mine. But

you gotta remember, we had a lot of men that was like that here that didn't have wives. They'd do whatever was best for them. So the lunches varied, depending who the individual was.

What day to day hardships do you recall?

The thing is it was dusty here. It's amazing. A coalmining town has coal dust over all the buildings. It's everywhere. There's trains and they burnt the coal and they went through. When it was windy it blew off the slack piles and was in the air. Consequently, you worked hard to keep your home clean and your family clean. In Canmore we lived up by the mine. It was so bad there that you did all your washing with ice cold water and soap and then you washed it in warm water. It wouldn't come out if you put it in warm water first. I had a real experience, because when I arrived in Canmore I had 3 babies. I had diapers. The engine that brought the cars from the mine out into the town of Canmore went by not even 40 feet from our house. It used to stop in front of our house and let the steam off. When the steam comes off, it's nothing but a fine soot. So you learned that the diapers were out and dry before the engine went by, or you waited until it went by and then you hung them out and hoped they were dry enough before it came back again on its next trip. It was very hard, and this is where a woman's life was hard. With this coal soot and dust in your house you're scrubbing all the time; otherwise things get pretty dirty. Here in 1955, '56 they had a couple of doctors in East Coulee that were here at all times. But the closest hospital was Drumheller. The winter of '57 my brother-in-law had 3 toes cut off in the mine. They brought him from the mine to the house, and then they took him by taxi to Drumheller to have the surgery to sew these toes back up. Because a rocket came down on his safety toe and literally cut the toes off in his boot. But he had to be

taken to Drumheller because that was the closest hospital. So actually they weren't too bad, because there was a couple of doctors here. The mine paid for them. There was medical, we used to refer to it as ... it was deducted off the miner's pay, then you could go to the doctors and the mine paid the doctors, is the way it worked. Then when we went to Canmore, those were the days of what we called MSI, medical services. Again it was deducted at the mine. MSI was a company, so it was a deduction from the mine and then they sent it to the company. But you didn't have to pay a doctor, it was already covered. I don't know the full extent. But I know the doctors here were paid, and it was deducted from off your husband's paycheque.

Did you know most people in the mining towns where you lived?

In that day and age, you seem to have known everybody. For instance, I would come out across onto the main street and go down to the post office to pick up the mail. You never passed a person that you didn't speak to. It was often hello, and quite often how are you. You took a second when you said those words, you didn't say them and keep walking on by. Everybody was friendly. We had a lot of people here that didn't speak English that well. But you still spoke, and they would speak back and nod and smile. There was a close relationship. You all depended on each other to survive on what was here. So you were friendly, and you were friendly with everyone. Realistically everybody knew you never knew when you might need help from each other. In all the places of business, like the bakery or grocery stores, everybody was very friendly and they knew everything about you. If you had a new baby, it's how's the baby doing? How many teeth has the baby got now? Everybody knew you and knew everything about your family. It was just a way of life when you went into these stores. I can remember one time there was a lady

walked into the grocery store that we went to. She really needed some new rubber boots. The storekeeper said to her, 'I think maybe you need some new ones.' She said, 'no money, no money.' He said, 'never mind, I think it's time.' And he handed her a new pair and out the door she went. This wasn't unusual to see. Or you'd ask for half a pound of hamburger and he'd say, 'well I have you a little bit extra,' but you knew you only got charged for half a pound of hamburger. They gave you things that you'd never think of getting now. There was families that was really having it tough. If the storekeeper had stuff that was a little bit surplus, he wouldn't hesitate to pass that over to that family. But you don't see that kind of thing now. In those days too, a little child never went in a store that he didn't get a piece of candy from the storekeeper. That was just a ritual. In those days we did not get milk at the store, you had a milkman. The milk was delivered every morning. To begin with, it was strictly a horse and wagon that brought this milk, and then they had trucks. In the winter it was quite fun, because if somehow you were busy and forgot and didn't get out immediately, the caps on top of the milk jars were cardboard and the milk would start to freeze and it would push these caps up. You'd go out and your milk cap would be sitting an inch above the top of the bottle because it was frozen already. Things like this.

But even with everyone pulling together, the irregularity of work must have affected families' ability to get by. How did people deal with this?

The way it usually worked is once they started to cut down, it would always seem to be after Christmas or January. At first they'd be missing one day a week. Then pretty soon they'd work one day, miss a day, work a day, miss a day, work a day. So now they're getting 3 days in a week. Then the next thing you'd see they're only getting 2 days in a

week. Then pretty soon they'd only be getting one day a week. Then if they got a large order they might get weeks of work, but then they'd be back again to one day or two days a week. When the mines really started shutting down, you take from about May, when the weather was nice and people didn't need as much coal to keep the houses warm. Because nobody had gas in those days. So this also had a major part to play in whether they worked or not. The weather's getting nicer in May, people aren't burning the coal, so by that time the mine would be completely at a standstill. September women are canning again, they need more coal again. October the weather's getting cold so people are burning more coal, so now the days are picking up and they're getting more. Now the cold weather's really socked in, so now they're all back working full time again.

Everybody had gardens, and everybody canned. You canned in the fall everything you could out of your garden. I didn't even have a fridge, so I canned everything I could out of the garden. We used to go up on top and pick wild mushrooms and I canned wild mushrooms. We'd go out picking Saskatoons and can them. I canned rhubarb out of the garden. Whatever you could that was going to be food to get you through the winter.

Everybody canned. That was just a normal part of it. When I was here I put down 450 jars of canning every fall. And of course people made their own wine. One of the popular things people made it out of here was the Saskatoons and choke cherries. Choke cherries were something we made lots of jelly with, and lots of syrup for pancakes. And it made real good wine. So did the Saskatoons and also the dandelions. So there was gallons of wine made out of that, along with all the canning. The majority of women made their own bread, and that was a good weekly chore. You didn't go to the store, you made your own cakes and cookies, and homemade candy at Xmas time. You made all this yourself.

You didn't go to the store and buy it. That's the way it was. It was just the natural way of living here.

At Xmas time the mine had a big Xmas party for the children. They would all get a gift and Santa would be there and they'd get a bag of candy. It was always the hard candy that you see very little now, and a Japanese orange and a candy cane. The majority of times this was the only bought candy that children ever seen at Xmas. And for a lot of children it was the only gift they got, was that that came from the mine. And all mines had Xmas parties.

Was there a fair bit of transience?

It had the same tendency as it does now. Some people would get into a job and stay there, and others it always sounded like the other mine might be better, so maybe I'll give it a try. Of course, they'd go to it and it'd be no better than the last mine they left. Let's face it, they were in the hotel drinking. I always said there was more coal mined in the hotel than there ever was out of the mines. Get drinking, and it sounds like that other mine must be better, so they would try that one. But eventually it boiled down it made no difference, one mine was no different than the other. The treatment wasn't much different at one mine than the other. But like the old saying, the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. That's the way it was.

Were there bathhouses in East Coulee

Ya, they did here. I never went to it. You didn't have bathrooms here. So a lot of families, the men would take their families to the bath house on Sunday so they could all have a good wash down. Because otherwise you had to get the washtub in and you filled it full of water and heated it on the stove. You always started with the youngest in the family.

You bathed them and worked down to the oldest, which was father. He got the last. And you kept adding hot water for each one. The little bathtubs are 2-1/2 feet by 2-1/2 feet, and that's what you have your bath in. So a lot of families went to the wash house. It was a lot easier. The water was plentiful and it was all heated. They could just go in and take clean clothes and get all nice and clean and go home.

Did people make organized trips to Drumheller?

It seemed to me that, I could be wrong, because it didn't happen when I was here but I did hear of it. It seemed to me what I relate to that is it was always to do with the union. It was the union that got this together and made it as a celebration. The union used to put on a big picnic for all of them and take a trainload. In those days, people in East Coulee were lucky if they got to Drumheller once a year. They didn't leave East Coulee. You had the Eaton's catalogue and you had the Sears catalogue, and they ordered everything they needed. And the store owners carried a lot of stuff. So between the catalogues and the stores, they could get everything they needed. So this trip into Drum, even though it's only 11 miles, was the big highlight of the year, that they would be able to go down there and go into stores and buy things they couldn't buy here. Otherwise they just shopped out of catalogues. They took trains, because very few people had cars.

Were the roads a challenge?

Exactly. I can remember when I came here. The road had big huge gravel. If it got rutted, it was like a washboard to ride on. It wasn't like now. And you traveled slowly, otherwise the cars couldn't take it. If you've never seen it I guess it's hard to visualize the difference. Because it was just a dirty road with all these big rocks on it. You wouldn't call it gravel, they were rocks. But in that day it would've been gravel.

We didn't travel that often. In fact, when I had our first baby it was the lady down the street that took me to Drumheller to the hospital to have my baby. The road was really bad. I can still remember, her name was Hazel Nodisty. Her and my mother-in-law took me, because my husband had gone to Calgary to look for a job because the mines had closed right down. I was due to have this baby. Hazel was quite a character. She kept saying, because my mother-in-law's name was Alexandra. She said, 'well Alexandra, if nothing else this road will shake that baby out and it'll be here by the time we get to Drumheller.' And it was a bumpy road.

What were the schools like?

The school teachers were very strict. In those days, the teacher was someone that you really looked up to and you paid attention and listened to. Because if you didn't do what the teacher asked you and your parents found out, you knew that when you got home you were in big time trouble. Because you were brought up in those days, to do exactly what the teacher told you and nothing else but, or you were in big trouble. And big trouble meant a strap. They didn't hesitate to strap anyone. In those days I can remember the girls played in one part of the playground, boys on the other. Boys went through one doorway, girls went through another. You did not go together. You lined up and didn't fool around. When you went into the school you were lined up outside the school, and you marched in. When you got in you hung up your clothes, sat in your desk, and the minute the teacher walked in you all stood up and sang God Save the Queen and recited the Lord's Prayer. At the end of the day you sang O Canada. You handed in your work, you did what you were told. The ones who didn't, they got the strap. And there's nothing worse than sitting in a room and the teacher and the other one goes out and you hear this whack,

whack and someone's crying. You don't want it. Children paid much better attention and did what they were told in those days. Things were very strict.

We didn't have a lot in school. In grade one you got one scribbler and a pencil and eraser. That was the limit. You took very good care of them. There was always a highlight in school for all kids, and that was there was always a big Xmas concert. You spent weeks rehearsing. Every classroom did some performing of some kind. It was weeks getting ready for this big concert, and of course everybody would dress their best and come to the concert. All the parents would come, and there'd be a Santa. Again, the children all got a bag of candy. This was a big highlight and a big time of the year.

There were kids with no English, but they were taken and taught English very quickly. Especially here in East Coulee there was a lot of Hungarian and Ukrainian and Polish, Czech, Italian. Consequently, the children, the minute they got to school, were started off with English. Some of these children couldn't speak English until they got to school, because in the homes they only spoke their native language. But young children pick it up fast, and that's what they did.

Did the churches play an active role in community life?

There was a lot of singing in the community. There were choirs in all the churches. The United Church here had its own choir, the Catholic Church had its own choir, and there was usually always a singing group in the schools. I know myself, the church I belonged to, we used to go out at Xmas time and do pageants and sing for other schools up and down the valley. There was a lot of this type of thing done. All natural entertainment. Oh yes, the Europeans' voices just ring. They were beautiful voices, especially the men. Men would sing for hours.

And a lot of what they sang was songs that had been passed down through generations. We had one man, Mr. Shark, he played the accordion. He was very popular. On a Saturday night the men would come home from the hotel with all these men and women, and he'd be in tow with the accordion. They come out singing and dancing and go all night long. He played for 2 days for our wedding. Around the clock, he never stopped. The people just danced and sung and danced and sung. Anybody that could play anything was very popular. People wanted it. They would sing without an instrument, but it was more fun to sing with an instrument around. He was one that was very popular, but there was many throughout the valley. And throughout the valley there was a lot of families that if there was enough of them they'd be an orchestra. They'd play for the dances. These dances would go on till 2 or 3 in the morning. And people danced. Not like now, all sitting down. They had a good time.

Ya, there was always an auxiliary with each church. The sole reason for these organizations was they needed a group of women in the church that would be able to do the care-taking in the church, look after setting up the altars. If there was a funeral, they would put on the lunch for that family. They also made money for the church. They would bake things and have bake sales at the churches. The women played, and still do to this day, a very large major role in life and everything that goes. They did these things to raise money to keep the church going, they did them for the community to keep the community going, and they would do them for the schools to keep the schools for the extra money they needed. So there was a lot of this type of thing. So here that's what the ladies played their part in. The charity work would be a bake sale. If a family lost everything to fire, you'd see immediately there'd be a dance put on. All the money at the

door that night would be given to the family. Then you'd see that, say the women at the United Church would put on a bake sale. All the money for the bake sale would go to that family. That's the way they did it.

There was obviously a great deal of community spirit. But were there other parts of community life that were less positive?

No. Well there's another side, it's not pleasant to talk about, but it's abuse situation. It was very prevalent in mining towns. It was very common for men to beat up their wives, and no one did anything about it. I don't know why it was left the way it was. About the only time anyone ever stepped in is some women were so severely beaten that the police would be called in. The neighbours would phone or something. But it was very common to see women walking around with blackened eyes and bruises. You knew what had happened, but people just took it as part of what life was. It wasn't all men like that, but some men were very very cruel to their wife and children. These poor families walked around with black eyes and bruises and cut faces. They were just very brutal, violent men, and that's the way it was. People would give the woman support, 'we feel sorry for you,' or try to help doctor her up. But no one really stepped in and stopped it. In that day and age every man's home was his own, and you didn't enter it or change things. It was very sad some of the things that happened. There's some very sad outcomes of it of women and children who were very violently treated. They're isolated, there's no money, they had nowhere to go. So what could they do? A woman that was beaten, if she went to the neighbour he'd just beat her when she came back more than ever. So she had to stay there and take it. She had no choice. She had nowhere to go, there was nowhere. She'd try

to defend her child and a lot of times that's where she got the worst of it, trying to defend children.

Some sides of it wasn't a pretty life. There was a lot of gambling for the young ones, even for some of the married ones. And there was a few houses of ill repute. Times haven't changed, men cheated on their wives. It was very noticeable. I know some wives that never got to leave their houses here in East Coulee. Their husband would be fooling around in the bar with other women. But that seems to be something that's been going on since the beginning of time. It's not a pleasant thing, but I guess it's one of the things of life. That's just the way it is, and it went on then as well. And of course the poor families where the men gambled, life was tough enough as it was. Imagine what life was like for them when this went on as well.

What were the popular sporting activities?

Yes, there was a lot of baseball in the valley here. Every mine had their own teams.

They'd play against each other and have tournaments. Same with hockey. They'd play hockey because it was a good form of entertainment. It was a real challenge to beat each other, one mine against the other. The teams all had their names.

You may think that ladies' hockey teams have only come into existence in the last 15 years. That would prove it's not so, because if there was a hockey team then... Children skated. There was a lot of figure skating. There'd be figure skating shows put on in the wintertime. The children would come and do their skating. It didn't cost anything. And if you seen what some of the people wore for skates. Some people would try to ski, and they'd make their own skis. A lot of it was homemade, not store-bought stuff. Very creative, very crude, but it gave them enjoyment.

How would you sum up the role of women in the mining communities?

I don't know if this pertains to it, but realistically you look in history and look at how things go. It's actually the women that are the major part of society and actually work the hardest of anyone. When you think back to then, and even now the working woman has to work hours and hours and hours beyond any man. I know in those days, I went to work when our oldest baby was 6 weeks old. I didn't have a wash machine. I had nothing but a square tub and a washboard. You go work in a restaurant as a waitress for yours, then you come home and have to do all your baby's laundry and get your husband's meals on the table. Even though you worked, you didn't get excluded from nothing, you had to work just as hard as ever. So the bottom line is I think in this society, women have always ended up having to work very hard to make a home and keep a home together. That's been a big major challenge for centuries is to keep that home together and do everything that needs to be done.

They go to the mothers. You get your kids in school. What do they want? They want the parents' group. But who makes up the majority of the parents' group? It's the mothers. So it doesn't matter which way you look at it or where you research. It's the mothers that keep everything together. And if you want to really accomplish something, you get a good group of women together and it'll be accomplished. And I'm not downsizing men, I don't mean that. They've got their role. But if you really want to look at things, that's where it's at. What can I say? I say if I was younger I'd run for politics.