

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Name of interviewee—Clara Montgomery

Name of interviewer—Don Bouzek

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Location of interview—East Coulee

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When and why did you arrive in the Drumheller area?

First of all, my name is Clara Montgomery from Morin, Alberta. That's just about 16 miles north of Drumheller, Alberta. At one time there was, in the early days when new people were coming off the train, everybody was so curious to know what your occupation was. So they asked this man what his occupation was and he said, well I'll tell you. I take the hell out of Drumheller, the Rowl out of Rowley, the rum out of Rumsey, and the more in Morin. Now what occupation was he? He was a minister. You have asked me how did I come to live in Morin or in the Drumheller area. In 1909 my dad came with his dad with a carload of settlers' effects from Benton, Arkansas. That's near Little Rock, Arkansas. He only stayed part of that year. My dad had signed the papers to prove up. He was under age, but they didn't know that. He was left alone, which was a pretty hard thing for him. In the wintertime he hitchhiked over to Olds and got a job there. He did keep on with farming. There was hard times and good times, but he became

a good farmer. From Stranmare, Saskatchewan my mother came, and that is near Saskatoon. Her aunt was needing help with her boarding house, which is just across from this sod house. It used to have a big wide porch. Two or three of the family helped in that boarding place. Her uncle had a livery stable. He fed the horses that the men would bring in. They would often have a wagon or sleigh of grain. There was eventually six elevators in Morin. Some of them were being built then.

The horses were being fed, but the men were not. There was no restaurant here. So he would bring them home and auntie would give them a lunch. So then they decided they should have a boarding house. She wrote down to my grandmother to have one of her daughters come, and that was my mom, Mary Noble. In one year she was married to George Storch. So auntie had to write down for another sister to come. Auntie Vi Olsen came, and in one year she was married to Chris Olsen, who lives just outside of Morin. By that time Morin was pretty well built up, so she didn't call for any more of the other 16 children. Anyway, I was one of 11 children. I was the second one. We lived on a farm northeast of Morin. Mother and dad lived on that farm until they died at a very old good age. They really enjoyed life. We played ball, and they played ball too. We had ice rinks, and we played cards. So we did have a good life. But we grew up during the war years, and the hired men, we used to have quite a few hired men, but now they were all at war. So my dad had to teach us to help with the farming. We milked cows, slopped pigs, plucked chickens and that sort of thing. Even in harvest time, we drove horses. He taught us how to stack a rack. Because there'd be the odd man that would like to get in first and he would just loosely pile them in. You'd almost go to the bottom of the rack when you did that. So our big thing was we had to keep our turn at going to the threshing machine,

and to stack it solid enough; so we were there longer than some of the men were. Which worked out all right too, we enjoyed doing that. We stooped the fields too. My sister and I stooped 100 acres of oats and other fields. Of course we had a large garden. We were just about self-sufficient. You had your own eggs and butter and milk. There was canning. There was no freezing at that time, but there was storage bins and that. I was born in 1923. Life has changed a great deal during that time. Now we had gone off of coal and now I hear a lot of talk about going back to making coal useful again.

Incidentally, my cousin from Saskatoon worked in the government buildings in Ottawa. In war years she would write and tell me that, I have just recorded another shipment of Drumheller coal coming through for the offices here. Otherwise we would never know that Drumheller coal reached Ottawa.

What can you tell us about the importance of coal to the people of Morin at the time?

For quite some time the roads to Drumheller were not in good shape. Many did not have trucks, but drove horses and sleighs and wagons. So we kept closer to home. The Hodgson Mine near Rowley provided coal for many in the area. The Trantham Collieries across the Red Deer River west of Morin gave good supply and service also in the early days. Few would use Drumheller coal at this time. There was strip mining near the Morin Bridge and a lot of people did the strip mining. It was a lot of work to remove the overburden of soil and grass. It would take a long day to return home with a full load of coal. It kept the family from freezing. Coal also was used in heating water and cooking your meals. It was very important to us. The neighbours often went together to help each other when they were gathering coal down there. The road down the hill was very

primitive, so sometimes they'd need each other to help. One sad story was told of several men working all day to remove the overburden. Darkness comes early in winter, so they left with plans to come back the next morning. On their arrival, much of the uncovered coal had already been taken. That was too bad. But that story was told quite often. A tragic story happened to a resident of Morin. A handyman, Shorty, went with him, and they arrived at the Red Deer River flat, where others had removed coal. They had only brought a stone boat, which is a flat, and the horses pulled it. So they couldn't take a big load. So they decided not to remove the overburden, but mine back underneath. It was on the very last, the fellow that owned the stone boat and horses had come out with his last load armful. But Shorty was still in when he heard a terrible crashing noise. He turned around to look and the bank caved in from up above, covering him. Of course the fellow had to dig him out, he couldn't leave him there. So it was after dark when he finally got the man uncovered and got him wrapped up in a robe they had brought with them. The horses knew the way. Men might lose their way, but the horses don't. They got them back to Morin. There was a dance underway at the time, and they didn't want the people at the dance to know about it. So he got a friend, and he wrapped this body in other coverings, and put it under the stairway where everybody had to come down past, but they were unaware that it was there. The next morning they took the body down to Drumheller. It very likely was Winters Funeral Home at that time. They would have to inform the police about it. The lady that it happened to her husband, she said, 'please don't put it in the Morin book.' So we didn't put it in the Morin book, but it did happen. There's still a man alive that knew Shorty and knew he had died down there.

Did you have chores associated with coal?

I did most of these at one time or another, and my mom and dad did too, and my brothers and sisters. The husband or wife filled the coal pails several times a day in winter, and placed it beside the coal stove because they couldn't run out of coal. Usually the coal was put down a chute into the earthen basement. Later, cement basements had coal rooms and a central furnace to keep stoves with coal. Another chore was carrying out the ashes every morning, when the ashes were the coolest and before you poked the clinkers and the ashes out to make the morning fire. As children grew older they took over these chores. Vance and I were married in 1947, and during the cold Christmas week of 1952, we had the Morin Co-op Store managers out for a visit and dinner. They didn't have any family around, so it was only right that people invited them into their homes. Vance was returning them to Morin, and it was late and so cold. I decided to stoke the furnace that night so that he wouldn't have to. You always selected the largest lumps of coal to put on the few glowing embers, and it would keep the house warm all night. By this time the government had banned strip mining, and most people obtained good clean coal from the Drumheller Valley Mines. Often the large lumps were 2-3 feet long, and would just fit in the large furnace doors. I still have a memento of that late December evening for the long black shiny lump of coal broke in half, and part of it hit my big toe. I still have that; it injured the nail bed of my big toe, and is still evident today. We were always being warned not to go near the ash pile. We understood this more clearly after my sister burnt her foot in the ash pile.

What do you know about accidents and about strikes in the Drumheller Valley?

We weren't visiting Drumheller very often in those days. The roads still weren't too good. We'd go down for coal, but we had local stores. But we would hear about them in the paper. But it didn't really affect us at all. The strikes didn't affect us, because in the fall we would lay in enough coal that we didn't have to go after any more until early spring. We went to the Napier Theatre, I remember that. My dad used to deliver eggs in Nackmine, and we'd go to the old Star Theatre, which kept burning down because of the coal seams underneath. We did do that. But otherwise, we didn't go for any other entertainment. We used to have stampedes and so on right here in Morin.

What was the impact on you of the decline of coal mining in the area?

Many homes removed their central furnaces, as all rooms did not benefit from the heat at a central grate. There was a big round furnace and there was a grate. The furnace was down in the basement, and there was a grate over a hole in the living room. That's where the heat came up. The bedrooms didn't get that kind of heat. There was the cook stove in the kitchen that heated it. We would take one of those heaters upstairs in cold weather to heat our bedrooms. Then they changed the type of heating of our houses. Many of us still have Kirks furnaces manufactured by the Kirks family of Three Hills. They burned and augured. They augured in the slack coal from a holding tank. You kept filling the holding tank with slack coal. There was a turning grate. It augured it into the turning grate, and the coal burned on that turning grate and the ashes went down below. Which you also had to take out, you had to remove those. But pipes were installed to each room, and dampers were installed to more readily direct the heat to whichever room you wanted, which was a great advantage. Ashes still had to be removed and dust was more prevalent in all the rooms. We really noticed that. This was kept down with the sale of oiled furnace slack

coal. They used to oil it. Once in a while if it was excessive you'd notice a bit of oily dust. But not very often. That was a real good thing that they did. Electricity came to our area in 1952, which was used by the Kirks Furnace also. Then electricity came to our area in 1952, which was used by the Kirks furnace. Then with the advent of gas, the Kirks family were able to install a gas burning fixture in the same furnace, which can still be turned back into coal burning. That manufacturing company was just over here at Three Hills. Men used to come over. Several of the farmers in this area still have coal-burning Kirks furnace at very little cost. Where ours might be hundreds of dollars, maybe he'd get away with \$200 of slack coal, where the other might be \$2-3,000. I'm not exactly sure on that. Our last coal from the Drumheller Valley was obtained from the Atlas Coal Mine. After it closed, coal was brought in by truck from Forestburg. For a number of years our family had the jobs of sweeping the Hillsgreen School west of Morin, carrying pails of water from the neighbour's farm across the road, and carrying coal pails of coal from the coal shed to put on the embers in the furnace to keep it alive overnight. There was an extra pail that was set beside the stove to be used in the morning. People would be very cold when they came, so it was nice to have that furnace going with the coal long burning too, where wood is more quickly burning. Sometimes ink bottles would be frozen. They were placed overtop on the grate until they thawed. You didn't dare keep the cork in or it would blow and hit the ceiling. Several times that happened. In cold weather we often brought our scrubbed potatoes. We'd poke them with forks and roast them over the furnace grate, and they'd be ready at noon time. So we'd all bring butter and salt and pepper and enjoy our hot potatoes.

This was a by-product of coal. In 1945 the coal finally managed to burn the Hillsgreen School down. It burned down through the bottom of the furnace and down into the wooden floor. It was over the weekend, and it burned the school. The Whiterose School was brought in from south and east of Morin as a replacement. It ran for several years. But then the bus service took the children into Morin. But it was kept open as a community centre for a number of years. Now it finally closed, they had to close it because the number of people in the area declined. The children had to be more faithful to the school than to our little centre. Now that school is in the Rowley museum They've got dolls there that represent each one of us. I can go there and find my name on one of the dolls that are sitting there. I went to school there. But I was over at Olds College when that burned down.

How do you remember the coal miners?

We didn't really mean to be disrespectful. But my dad would go down on Saturdays. Of course the coalminers had Saturday off, and Sunday. So they would get their groceries and whatnot. But they always ate garlic. Of course they went to the beer parlours too. You couldn't hardly walk by it, it was so thick with garlic. But they were hard-working people, and nobody begrudged them their garlic, or their beer either. I toured the Atlas Coalmine, and I don't know how they kept warm with those open boards. Of course it was letting the dust out.

Tell us about entertainments at the time.

Curly Gurvitch came out of Calgary with shows. Every Friday night he would have a show. Or it could be Saturday night. On Friday nights we had dances. Then we would go to Firp and Dempsey were big Chinese men at the café. Our favourite was ice cream with

cut-up cherries. It was very good. Other people had sandwiches or whatever. It was always quite peaceful. But this one night there was a railroad man. He was red headed and he was from Munson. No maybe he was from Morin. But this little dark haired fellow was from Munson. All of a sudden it seemed like, I don't know what started the quarrel, but the little fellow was going underneath the seats. There was walls between each table, and you were in a table with benches on both sides. Underneath your seat was open. So this little French fellow, he got underneath and over the top. This other bigger fellow couldn't make it as fast. It got pretty hot in there. The Chinese guy, he come with his big cleaver and was going like this. Everybody got back and down out of sight. He put them outside the door. We'll never forget that, because that was great excitement in those days.

I know the Morin Flyers are still famous, and they've been nominated to be elected to the Hall of Fame for next year. They won 3 championships for Alberta. It's softball. There was a limit on them. You had to be raised in that area. If you brought in imports you can't apply for that honour. We had a shirt-tail relative, but he was a very small man. He was an official tiny tailor. He was an official judge referee at the ball games. One time down at the river, he had already umpired a game and it was another person's time. The crowd got pretty rowdy and were saying not nice things to the players. Players were getting very angry. So they pulled that referee and got Tiny to take over. That little fellow just pointed his finger and you, if you say one more word, out of the game you go. And nobody did. We were always so surprised. He was just like a little bantam rooster.

There used to be a lot of fishing at the river. There was sturgeon in the Red Deer River down here. Oh they're ugly looking. But they're really interesting. I've just heard there's

more sturgeon just being caught too. The gold eye were special down there, they were wonderful to eat. But the people in early days, they lived on the fish from the river, the quail and partridges, and the other meat that they raised. One time ...

... on the fence. When the neighbours came by, they shot it. It was dead. So when it just fell over but still hung on, it was tied on. So they got a coyote and froze it. It was in a running position. So when he come along he shot it. It didn't do anything. So when he come and found it was frozen and they'd set it up for him, he hit it with his gun and broke his gun. We'll always remember that one. I think it's in the Morin book too.

This stove in here came from the Golden Grain School across from our home. It was used for many years by the schoolteachers. It used coal. Quite a few stoves used to have jackets on the side. The stove heated the water then, so you always had hot water. And this barrel was brought by one of the Miller boys. All those people that are named on there, there's about 8 or 10 including my dad. They used to get together and play horseshoes. Between them they'd buy a barrel of beer. The women would supply the food. So he brought that in for old time's sake. I think that's it.

Tell us a bit about the development of the town.

In the early days, the train came in. Before the train came in this town, well the start of it was named Blooming Prairie, because of so many flowers on the prairie. That was over about a mile east of here, or maybe a half mile. The train came in and missed it completely. So then they had to, and the railroad people named it Morin. I liked Blooming Prairie better. We thought for years it was named after the first engineer through. Then at later years at one of our homecomings there was a notice put in the Calgary paper that anybody interested in coming to the Morin homecoming, please come.

This lady, she had been a Morin, and the fellow that was in charge of naming all the little towns, he knew Mr. Morin. Wrote back and they still have that letter asking if they could name this little place Morin after him. They came out and led our parade. We still keep in touch with them. They gave us a picture and the story of their dad, or their grandfather. He came from a big almost like a mansion type house down in Ontario. That's where that Morin name originally came from.

The land surveyors had been here. Now they had to have people in that were legal and municipalities were starting, they had to have all those type of men there. So some of them roomed upstairs across the road here in auntie's boarding house. Linsgrass and some of them. He had very fine features. Of course all the men were very interested in any ladies coming in to town. They were scarce as hen's teeth. Here this lady come off the train. There was a dance that night. They all made themselves acquainted and they all danced with this girl. She shone up to all of them. Later on they found out it was Lynn Scrap. He dressed up in Auntie Elma's clothing. Long dress, and he could dance just like a girl, and held his little finger out. But my Aunt Elma and my mom still laugh about that. The lumberyard had to be built. The lumber, all of that came in on the train. Then they built the lumberyard and the schools. They eventually had 6 elevators there. Now we have none. We wanted to keep one, but they wouldn't let us. They didn't tell us when they were coming to knock it down. We tried to make agreements to keep one. But they said, 'well it would be astronomical.' They wouldn't let us have it because the insurance, in case somebody was hurt, would be too much. But that lower end of town, on the north and east side, was all slough at one time. And still in the spring when it's wet, their

basements all flood. At one time they did have a golf course out here, but now they've turned it into you can play ball and that sort of thing.

There's one thing behind you over there, there's a bottle. Can you pick up that bottle back there? This is a Cape Cod bottle, and it's got a marble in the top of it. They could never keep the effervescence in. They tried many different kinds of stoppers. But when the effervescence came, and it would go up to the top and stay there, and you'd have to push it down in order to drink out of it. They said the worst enemy of this bottle was that little boys broke it to get the marble out. I bought that out in Victoria. There's a paper on the history of the Cape Cod bottle. There is a milk bottle up on top there, and maybe several. We used to have a dairy out north and west of Morin. Hans Henningsmoon used to bring in the milk for everybody always. Then of course the health system shut him down. He was getting too old. But in his old age he came in and looked after the children who came to the skating rink and the skating shack. He helped put on their skates. Everybody has fond memories of him doing that. He had quite a family of his own, and his wife had died.

Any other stories you could tell us about those times?

Over in that corner is a roll of wire that goes in loops. Doug Rendall over on the No. 9 Hwy found 7 of those underneath where a sod house had collapsed on top of it. He brought one of them into the sod house. He helped build it too. And my husband Vance, the two of them were the main instigators of it. But Ted Aravola said he believed it was shipped in on the railroad to mend the page wire fences, to keep sheep and cattle in. So that's really something. Because it was under a sod house, it dates it back too. Also in that corner is a surveyor's stake. A surveyor's stake has the queen's crown on it. It also has the

location that the men that did the surveying, the stakes were named for that corner. That's how you found your land. There was no roads, no anything. But each stake was in the middle of 4 holes. These holes seemed to be about this deep, maybe not quite a foot deep. They were very precise in 4 circles. Nothing grew in that. Whatever they put in those holes, I've never heard. But nothing grew in that. We used to walk down past them to pick berries at the river. We were always amazed. Weeds and grass grew everywhere. If grass didn't grow, weeds certainly did. But they never grew in those spots. One time when I was picking berries, the Saskatoons were ripe and I asked my brothers and sisters if they'd like to come and pick Saskatoons at the river. At the top of the river, sometimes we went down below. One time when we were picking down below I found a round musket while we were eating lunch. Another time a 22 shell was by us. That was an experience too. One time my sister found a dinosaur tooth. She put it in her jean pocket. We all know now, you should wrap it in a leaf and put it at the bottom of your pail because it became dust. Nothing left of it, because of the friction walking. But this one time when I asked if anybody would like to come and pick berries with me, cuz I just loved doing that nobody would. So I said, 'well I'll go by myself.' It was a beautiful morning. Nice and cool, and the birds were singing. Lots of big berries. All of a sudden a drone started up, and it got louder and louder until it nearly split your head. It was really loud. Right down there below you could see into a cockpit. From Penhold, there was an airplane came, and went up again. They were practicing low flying. They came up that coulee. Scared the living daylights out of me. It took a while to recover from that one and get back home. Another time my sister Helen and I went to the river. Our mom said, just take 2 pails. Don't take anything more. We thought, what's the use of walking all that way

for 2 pails. It would be a milk pail. So we took sacks. You could tie them at one end, in the middle, and then at the other end and put it over your shoulder. We forgot, saskataoons only have seeds and choke cherries have stones. They were so heavy. It got dark at night. We managed to get up that hill that had a number of places in that bank. You had to go over deep fissures. We knew we had to cross that before dark. The rest of it we knew. My dad had built a big dam. Helen and I were walking, and we were hoping that Johnny would come with the Jeep. And yes he did. He came across the top of the dam, and he left it running and started yelling at us. We were yelling back, and we weren't that far apart. He could've heard us if he'd shut off that Jeep. Well he turned around and went home, and we walked the whole way home. We didn't dare show mom the sacks in the morning. We just had the pails.

The first radio I ever heard was at my aunt's place. It was one of those that was an earphone thing. She put it in a bowl and the resounding off that bowl, we could all put our ears down close to it and hear it. That was really something. Then as we got the battery radios, they were big batteries and they cost a lot and we couldn't listen to them very often. My dad, at dinnertime we would hear the news. While we read the funny papers and whatnot, he would listen to the Toronto Maple Leafs and Montreal Canadians play hockey games. Then later on, as the radios got more improved, we would hear Ma Perkins and all of those plays. We had electric lights by Delco by wind charger. The wind chargers were fair high. It would keep us in lights. Our washing machine didn't run on it. But the Delcos, the batteries took, there was 2 or 3 long shelves just to run the lights. So that wasn't practical. Now their wind chargers are much more efficient. One time my dad was going up to the top of the wind charger. When he got up there he said, 'Clara, I

forgot to bring that wrench up. Would you bring it up?' I said, 'oh that's a long ways up.' I started up, and I made the mistake of looking down. I said, 'oh I feel funny.' He said, 'you keep coming straight up and look straight up. Even when you start going down, you keep looking straight up. It don't make you dizzy if you do that.' But if you looked down, I got dizzy as soon as I did. I managed to make it up and back again. It was the only time I did that. He was a big man, and I always admired him for going up on top of that wind charger.

There is a buffalo head over there. The leather soles, you could keep putting on another piece of leather. You cut the leather, then it would do for another couple of years or be passed down to the other children. But now with plastic, you can't mend shoes. But over there is 2 or 3 of the different sizes of shoe. We did the butter in that churn where you dashed it up and down. But our neighbours had one over in the corner there where you went back and forth. We were down there visiting. We'd never seen that kind of churn before. So we were all very happy to help with the churning. All of a sudden, we didn't know, you had to take the bung out to release what got built up inside, the air. It blew the bung and there was cream all across the top of the ceiling. So we all had an extra job we didn't know about. You can see there's two pieces of wood over there beside the cream separator. One is solid and it's got tape on it. My dad brought that up. It was either mulberry or walnut wood. It's hard. That was in the ground from 1918 until 1980. We had that one brought in. But look what happens to the softer wood that's in the one beside it. It goes to pieces. If it was down on the ground it would be rotten completely.

And that?

Yes. A lady that taught school here for many years. Her mom and dad, her dad was a minister and lived out near the Sunbeam School. They held church in their home for years until the churches were built in here. Then she taught school in here, and her brother and sister and their mom were the pillars of the United Church in Morin here. When she had a sale and our Sunbeam community served the lunch for it, I bought that to put in the sod house. It has wooden spools and they used it as a shelf. Both top and bottom shelf too. Now we don't have wooden spools anymore, so that's quite a memento. The cream separator, younger people don't know much about that anymore. The cats would sit below whoever was milking the cow, and would get a mouthful of warm milk. Somebody would squirt it in their mouth. But when the pails of milk were brought to the house, they were strained and put in the top. You had to run the handle hard enough, because there was a ding went on until you got it going hard enough, and then the ding would stop. Then you could turn on the top and the disks would separate the cream from the skim milk. The cream would go, there's one shelf there that moves around. You put that under the cream one and you'd have a bowl there to catch it. Then the skim milk would go into a pail. Of course we drank whole milk that had the cream skimmed off, and we used the cream on porridge and whatnot. Whatever we skimmed the main cream off is what we drank. But of course the pigs and calves and everything drank that skim milk. It was good for them. Of course there's bluing up there that we never use anymore, the old telephones. There's a gold pan there. Do you know, in the dirty 30s people made more money panning for gold under the Content Bridge than they made for their crops? There's quite a bit. It gets worn down as it's coming down the river. But it's transported by the river. Because there's a swift swirl there, it gets out and settles.

Where is Content Bridge?

It's between Red Deer and here. There is no town there, but it's at the river. One time I went panning for gold on the Red Deer River. There was a fellow came out of Calgary. They told about gold being panned all over the world. The told a terrible one about this fellow that went under. There was a seam under the water under a river or lake. The one fellow that went down and sent gold up, they cut his air line off so it was divided between two instead of three. That was pretty gruesome. But there's gold being panned all over the world. But anyway, when we were panning, they took us out to the Red Deer just a little north and west of Drum. There was a fellow, who I'm sure you know, but he brought back a whole pail full. He wasn't sure whether it was fool's gold or gold. He never told his wife about it, because he kept taking his dirt bike up there and bringing more back. He brought this pail down, and it was fool's gold. It looks better than gold does. When we were panning, I happened to get a fairly good flake of gold. There's lots of garnet in the river, red garnet. Just little beads, but there's a lot of it. I got another flake right at the last. I was so excited about it. I gave it to the instructor. Somebody else asked me a question and I turned around to look and he said, 'oh dear, I lost it.' So I don't know if he lost it or took it. I really enjoyed that course. And do you know that up in the top we were studying about Peter Fidler. I had got his history book, of when he was here about 7 or 9 days in 1792. It was the early spring of '93 they were down here at the river near the Morin Bridge and the Native men made the Saskatoon bows. The women went into the cut banks, and they knew where to scrape to take off the moss. They got a substance that was yellow. They kneaded it and made little hamburgers out of it and flattened them and put them on the fire. When it had been on there long enough they turned red, that's red ochre.

They would rub that on their faces and hands and on their jackets to keep from cracking.

It was just like cold cream. Peter Fidler found the first mentioned cactus.