

MERCER, ROBERT

Today is August 15, 1977, and I am talking to Mr. Robert Mercer and Mr. Mercer is going to tell me how he first came to Saanich. I think you said your family was already in the Victoria area. How did they first come here?

RM Well my Dad and Mother both came from the Old Country.

Q. Which one?

RM Which District? Up in Lancashire, Preston. They first, when they came, they came in 1887. They spent one year, one winter, in Winnipeg and then they came out to British Columbia.

Q Do you know why they first came out here?

RM Well, the same as all the rest of the pioneers, you know, seeking greener pastures or something like that. I guess they thought, at that time, that the Old Country was getting a little bit crowded and the prospects were a little bit better in Canada. And so, my sister, Mrs. Webster, she was born in Winnipeg and they spent a few months, not very long, in Vancouver. Then they came to Victoria.

Q. What was your father's and your mother's names?

RM My father was William Mercer and my mother's name was Rebecca Mercer.

Q Do you remember what her maiden name was?

RM Yes, her maiden name was Rebecca Wood.

Q And she was born in Lancashire as well?

RM No, she was born in North Hamptonshire. A little place called Woodford. When they came to Victoria my father was a turner by trade and he worked in the mill, at Muirhead and Manns. And actually he was raised on a farm before he learned his trade and he always thought he would like to go farming. First of all, he bought one cow just for ourself and then the neighbours wanted milk, and then he had to buy another cow.

Q Was that on Alpha? That was your first home, on Alpha?

RM Yes. And we lived on Alpha Street until 1900. By that time we had twelve cows.

Q Did you have much property there?

RM Oh no, we only had an acre there, but of course, there was lots and lots of wild land all around. In 1900 we rented Rowlands Place on the Burnside Road where Colquitz Junior High is now, and it ran right over to where the Drive-in show is. And we stayed there until April 1, 1909. That's when we moved over here to Blenkinsop Road.

Q And you've been here since 1909.

RM We bought here, my Dad, first bought one hundred and twenty-five acres when Blenkinsop was first opened. That's the year that Saanich was first incorporated. In 1906, when we bought first. There wasn't any buildings and there wasn't any cleared land, only a few acres, and so we had to wait until we had cleared some

land and built a barn and built a home to come to.

Q. Your father built this home that we're at now?

RM No, it's that big green house down there. This home was built in 1916, the year that we were married. And I've lived in it ever since.

Q Your family then, when they leased the land from Rowland, how many acres was that?

RM One hundred and twenty-five acres off of Rowland.

Q Off of Rowland as well, do you remember what he paid for the lease?

RM No, I don't remember what it was.

Q Not all of that land would have been cleared would it?

RM No, there was quite a lot cleared though. Right where the Drive-In Theatre is you know, that part was cleared. And quite a lot on the other...you see it ran right back to Carey Road, the property did. There was quite a lot of it cleared. We used to have a retail milk business from there.

Q You did.

RM Yes, we used to retail milk.

Q So you didn't have to market it yourselves, in other words, people would come to you to buy it?

RM Oh no, we used to deliver it all around, Rock Bay, Victoria West and Oak Bay and all around.

Q You had quite a route then?

RM Oh yes.

Q Did your father work on it himself or did he have other people to help him?

RM Well, my Dad, he delivered milk for seven years and never missed one day and then as the thing grew bigger and bigger, you know we had help. When I was fourteen years old I was big enough to deliver milk so I had to do it.

Q So, at that time, Mr. Mercer, how many cows did you have?

RM Over on Burnside? We had about eighty head.

Q And were they all hand milked?

RM Oh sure. There was no such a thing as milking machines then.

Q Did you have quite a few men working for you at the time?

RM Oh yes, yes. Mostly Englishmen you know, some Chinamen to do the rough work.

Q So, the family then set up a retail business. Did you have any butter or cream that you delivered as well?

RM Well, most of the cream we used to send to the Victoria Creamery.

Q Where was that located?

RM On Carey Road.

Q So it was quite near by?

RM Oh sure, right outside of our back gate.

Q Did they build it after you came there or was that before?

RM That was built...the Victoria Creamery was built in...I should say...about 1904.

Q So that was before you reached that area then.

RM Yes. The Victoria Creamery was a sort of Co-op, owned by the farmers in Saanich.

Q Was that a part of the Dairymens' Association?

RM Well, no, we didn't have a Dairymens. It was just an organization of farmers and the cream used to come in on the old V & S.

Q The Cordwood Express.

RM Yes. Well, the Creamery was right by Town and Country. There's a little V-shaped piece of property there that was going to have a Shopping Centre on it but was never materialized. Francis Norton and Dr. Knight were the only two employees there and they used to make butter. And, at that time, it used to be put in pound cans to ship to the Yukon.

Q And they were sealed in the cans. And that was their major business then?

RM Oh, that's all they did.

Q They didn't sell it sort of locally at all?

RM Well yes, some of the butter was sold here in Victoria, and in Vancouver. Wherever they could find a market you know. But most of it was for export to the northern country.

Q And how would it travel up there? By boat?

RM Yes. There wasn't any planes around then.

Q No. I just wondered how they travelled it up there. Was it Dr. Norton?

RM No, Francis Norton and Dr. Knight. Well he wasn't a doctor then, he was just Mr. Knight. But afterwards he went in for veterinary.

Q Yes, I was going to ask if he was your Veterinarian. With those eighty head of cows did you have a Vet that you used to deal with?

RM Oh yes.

Q. Who was that?

RM Dr. Hamilton.

Q And where did he hail from?

RM Oh he was a Scotsman, but he lived in the City of Victoria. And later on there was Dr. Richards and Dr. Tolmie. Dr. Tolmie used to have a practise in the City of Victoria too.

Q Was that Simon Tolmie?

RM Yes. Afterwards, Premier of British Columbia.

Q Pretty important Veterinarian.

RM Yes, a very fine man.

Q Was he a good Vet?

RM Very good. He owned the whole of Braefoot Farm. Do you know where Braefoot is? That was Dr. Tolmie's farm. His home was on Cloverdale Avenue.

Q So he was later one of your neighbours then.

RM Oh yes, yes.

Q When you moved up here to Blenkinsop, did you continue to deal with the Victoria Creamery?

RM No, and when we moved out here to Blenkinsop we still kept our retail route for one year and we found it too difficult to retail from here with horses. It was too far. Then we started shipping to the Victoria Creamery. See, the Victoria Creamery moved from out on Carey Road, they moved to Johnson Street, it would be about the six hundred block on Johnson Street, right opposite the Johnson Street Parkade. Then that got too small for them and they started retailing milk, and ice cream and by-products. And they moved to Broad Street and from Broad Street they went bankrupt.

Q That was the end of them was it? What year would that be?

RM That was in 1912.

Q So they weren't going actually that long before they were finished. What would you say drove them out of business?

RM Poor management.

Q Poor management?

RM Absolutely, poor management.

Q There was no other competition in the area?

RM Oh yes, see there was the Royal Dairy and Francis Norton, who used to work for the Victoria Creamery, he went in with a man by the name of Smellings, and they started a Dairy on Cormorant Street, right where Centennial Square is today. They prospered very well. They called themselves The Northwest Creamery. And they moved up to Broad Street where the old Victoria Creamery was. They sort of amalgamated, and then afterward, Francis Norton was the Manager, they moved up to Yates Street where to day is Silverwood Dairies.

Q. So was that the early start of Silverwood Dairies?

RM Well no, Silverwood is National wide. It goes right across Canada.

Q They just picked them up then when they came this far west.

RM They absorbed the Northwest.

Q When you moved out here to Blenkinsop you bought a hundred and twenty-five acres. Do you remember what your father paid for that land?

RM Yes, Six Thousand Dollars.

Q For one hundred and twenty-five acres? And who did he buy it from?

RM Well we bought it from Glendenning. You see Glendenning Farm ran all the way

from down here to Cordova Bay Road you know, Beach Drive. And right up to the top of Mount Douglas. They owned the whole thing right back to Broadmead. Of course, when they subdivided, well most of them, ours was one hundred and twenty-five acres and Simmonds Brothers, they had seventy-five acres.

Q Next door to you?

RM Yes. And anyways in 1912 we bought seventy-five acres off Harry Simmonds which made out farm into two hundred acres. Then the railroad came through here.

Q That's the V & S?

RM Yes...No, No., the C.N.R.

Q Oh, the C.N.R. Okay.

RM They took five acres off of us.

Q They just sort of pre-empted it?

RM No, not exactly. They came through here and they offered us all a thousand dollars an acre, which at that time was quite a good price, you know. Our next door neighbours, they sold for a thousand an acre and Lussy's next door they sold. They had an acre and they had an acre and ours was five acres. My father said, "No, you're cutting the property right in half and I won't take that". "Well, that's all we're going to offer and if you won't take that you'll have to go to arbitration!" So we went to arbitration, my father did, and we got fourteen thousand five hundred.

Q For the five acres. You did well then. It was worth the trip. What year would that have been?

RM 1912.

Q Your father was a pretty sharp businessman then?

RM Well, he was my Dad and I never met a man since that had so much foresight, energy, as he had.

Q I understand from talking to some of the other dairy farmers or dairymen that it was a pretty hard life. You need a lot of energy to be a dairyman.

RM Yes, yes. Early in the morning and late at night, you know.

Q When you were a young man of fourteen, can you tell me what your day was like?

RM Well, you see, at fourteen, I went to what you call Grade Twelve, but it was only the fourth reader. You'd try for high school. Of course, I was quite a big boy and my Dad thought it was time I went to work. So I was put on a milk cart to deliver milk and I delivered milk from 1906 to 1909 when we moved over here. For three years and I never missed one day either. Used to kind of be against the grain a little bit to see all your school pals out playing baseball and things like that, but I was a farmer's son and that was that.

Q What did you sell your milk for? Did you take it in two and a half gallon cans? And then dip it out?

RM There was no such a thing as bottles. My route was Rock Bay and Victoria West. And in the afternoon we used to go to Springridge and Oak Bay. We never touched James Bay at all. That was Rogers territory.

Q That would have been George Rogers, your neighbour up here. So what did you use to sell your milk for?

RM How much? Ten cents a quart.

Q And five cents a pint?

RM Yes.

Q And what was cream running?

RM Mostly all the milk was sold in those days by the month. We never had any tickets, bottles or anything.

Q So you would just have to remember then what everybody had taken over the month.

RM Oh yes, you had a book. They didn't vary a great deal, they'd take a quart a day or two quarts, whatever it was. If they wanted any extra, as a rule they used to pay for that. If they wanted an extra quart of milk they would pay rather than have it put on their bill.

Q So, when you moved up here then in 1909 you delivered milk for another year after that and then you took it all to the Victoria Creamery. And still in the horse and buggy.

RM Oh sure, we never had a car until 1917. It was very, very,....very few cars.

Q You were telling me you went to school. Did you go to school on Roland Avenue then?

RM No, went to school on Tolmie...Tolmie School on Tennyson.

Q On Tennyson.

RM Boleskine. Tennyson comes up the other way. The old Tolmie School. There's a new Tolmie School on Boleskine now.

Q The same spot?

RM Do you know where the English Church is on Boleskine?

Q On Boleskine? Across from that?

RM Yeah, the old school was right at the back of the church and the new school was built across the road.

Q And you used to go there as well?

RM Oh no.

Q By the time you got here you were already working full time eh?

RM Sure. I was working full time in 1906, three years before we came over here.

Q Do you remember who your first teacher was?

RM Sure, there were three teachers. There was Miss Godson, MRs. McKenzie and

Mr. Ralph Rennie Watson. R.R. Watson. He was the Principal. A wonderful man.

Q Do you remember some of your classmates? Who did you go to school with?

RM Oh sure. Well there were very very few of them. There's only two...Sam Roskelly and Henry .. there's only two left who went to Tolmie School when I did. You know when you get to be eighty-five years old..

Q You lost a few of your classmates. Did those boys go on to Victoria High School?

RM There was only a couple out of our class that went on to High School. One was Scott Watson, the Principal's son, and Dorothy Astell, she went on to High School. But in those days education wasn't rated the way it is today.

Q I think probably the farm took precedence over education, is that right?

RM Yes, definitely.

Q There was always lots of work to be done?

RM Yes, but see today there is so many other attractions that a lot of the young boys are not inclined to stay on the farms.

Q So, are you an only child then, Mr. Mercer?

RM Oh no, there was four in our family. There was a girl, a boy, a girl and a boy.

Q And are you the youngest son?

RM No, no. There was four years between all of us.

Q. That was family planning.

RM Yes.

Q What were your brothers and sisters names?

RM My sister, she lives on Cook Street. She's Mrs. Webster. And my other sister, she lives on Belmont, Mrs. White, Mrs. Cleve White. And my brother, he was drowned in Cordova Bay in 1912.

Q Did you use to go over to Cordova Bay for picnics and that sort of thing?

RM Yes. We went down there on a Saturday afternoon with some other boys, swimming, and he was drowned. The rest of us are still hobbling around.

Q What was your Mother's interest in the farm? Did she work hard?

RM Oh yes. Of course we always had three or four hired men and my oldest sister, she never went to High School. She stayed home and helped Mother the same as I worked on the farm. My other sister, she was a city girl. She went to High School, took a business course. She worked in the City of Victoria and married a lawyer. She was a city girl.

Q So your Mother was kept fairly active in making the meals for the hired men?

RM Yes. She was always active in the Womens' Institute. She was the past president of the Womens' Institute.

Q Which one would that be? South Saanich or Royal Oak?

RM The Lake Hill Womens' Institute.

Q And where was that located?

RM Well, right on the corner of Lodge and Quadra. Where the JayCees have it now. They bought the building there.

Q Do you know when that first started? The Lake Hill Womens' Institute?

RM The Lake Hill Womens' Institute was first started in 1912.

Q So that would be three years after you started here then.

RM Yes.

Q Did you have much of an opportunity to get together with your neighbours?

RM Well, we were always taught to always be friendly with your neighbours because you might never know when you need them.

Q That's good philosophy, isn't it?

RM Well ever since I've lived on Blenkinsop Road, all the old timers have gone, I'm the only one left of the real old timers along here you know, and I'm friendly with them all. There's dozens and dozens along Blenkinsop Road and Pearce Crescent, all around there, I don't know a third of them you know.

Q Did you have a chance, was there a nearby Community Hall that you could go to to Saturday Night dances?

RM Well yes, there was always up at Cedar Hill X Road...

Q The Temperance Hall?

RM Yes, sure. Oh, and of course, we used to go to town to dances and everything.

Q Where did you go in town then?

RM Oh different dances. It didn't matter where, we would always go, you know.

Q Find out where they were and get on eh?

RM Sure.

Q Did you use to drive down in your horse and buggy then?

RM Sure.

Q And how did you meet your wife, Mr. Mercer?

RM At a dance.

Q And you courted her.

Q And your father gave you a piece of land then to start your own dairy?

RM Oh no, I worked. We worked together. You see, my sister's husband, he and I worked together as partners. My Dad died in 1925.

Q You had to carry the load then.

RM In 1916 when I was married he built this house for a wedding present.

Q For you and your wife? Oh isn't that a marvelous gift. You were pretty fortunate then. This is a gorgeous home. Did he build it himself?

RM No, contract.

Q Do you remember the name of the Contractor?



RM Sure. W.J. Drysdale.

Q Oh right. He was quite a popular man around these parts.

RM Oh yes, yes. He built dozens and dozens of homes in Victoria.  
Dozens of them.

Q So your Mother continued to live on in this area then?

RM Yes Mother stayed on at the farm. Well, she died in 1941. She stayed until 1940  
and then she went into town to live.

Q How many head of cattle did you have by that time?

RM Oh we always ran about eighty head, you know. Young stock and like that.  
Some sheep too.

Q Did you really. Keep chickens?

RM Oh yes. Not a unit of chickens, just barnyard chickens.

Q Enough for home. How did you store your meat then?

RM Well, as a rule, we would rent a locker. Wilsons Cold Storage. That's where we  
used to take our meat and then in latter years, Lowe built lockers at Lake Hill  
and we used to take it there.

Q Lets go back to these Saturday night dances. You used to go to the Temperance  
Hall on Cedar Hill X Road. What was that like?

RM Oh very nice, very, very nice.

Q What sort of evenings would you have there?

RM Oh dancing and there used to be card parties and like that.

Q Who did you have come and play music for you?

RM There used to be a fellow called Fred Alexander.

Q Fred Alexander was a black person?

RM Yes, sure.

Q He lived in this part too?

RM No, he used to drive a tallyho and a hack for Brays Transfer and he used to play  
the violin. And he'd pick up anybody else who could play the piano and that's  
all you needed.

Q And you'd go out and have a gay old dance.

RM Oh yes. We'd go to Strawberry Vale Hall, it's still on Burnside Road. And then  
there was the Royal Oak Hall which is the Royal Oak Womens' Institute now. And  
then we used to go out to Saanichton, out to the Agricultural Hall.

Q To the Fair there too?

RM Oh sure.

Q Did you participate in that Fair?

RM We used to take sheep out there lots of times.

Q Did you win any prizes?

RM Oh sure.

Q What kind of sheep did you have?

RM Purebred Oxford.

Q And what did you do with the sheep? Did you raise them for meat or for wool?

RM Well for both, both wool and meat.

Q Did your Mother spin?

RM Yes, yes, yes. Oh they made lots of quilts, you know.

Q They used it for batting for quilts?

RM Sure.

Q Is that something that she'd do at the Lake Hill Womens' Institute?

RM Yes. They used to make a lot of quilts there. Wash the wool and card it and spin it.

Q Was there still quite a few Indian people around at that time? Did you use them for any kind of work at all?

RM No, not very many. They were out in Central Saanich. They worked out in Central Saanich but not around here.

Q Did you ever buy fish from them?

RM Oh yes, lots and lots of times.

Q Did they use to deliver it to you?

RM Sure, they used to come around here. Twenty-five cents for a big salmon. Eight and ten pounds. Oh yes. Oh the olden days had their advantages. I think we had the best of it in the old days. You know, there wasn't so many restrictions and there wasn't any income tax.

Q Well, you had children, Mr. Mercer. Where did they go to school?

RM They went to Cedar Hill School and Mount Douglas High.

Q And how did they get to school?

RM Oh, on their bicycles. Some times I would take them in the car. Mostly on bicycles. In 1924 or 1925, there was an old school bus run along here, they used to go on the school bus and then when they opened the school down at Cordova Bay they stopped that and all the children this way in District 61, that's part of Ward #1, Ward #5, had to find their own way to school.

Q You know, the Victoria Creamery, I'm sorry to change the subject here. But after the Victoria Creamery closed down, did you start dealing then with Northwest?

RM When Victoria Creamery closed down we started shipping to the Royal Dairy.

Q And where were they located then?

RM The Royal Dairy was on Douglas Street. They had two brances. They had one close to the corner of Fort and Douglas and the other one was pretty near opposite the City Hall right where Miss Friths is now, close to Fisgard Street.

Q. So did you have to deliver out there yourself?

RM. Oh yes, sure.

Q What did you make, one run a day?

RM Yes.

Q Morning?

RM Yes, we used to be in there about half past seven, quarter to eight in the morning.

Q How long did it take you to drive down there?

RM Pretty nearly an hour. We used to allow ourselves nearly an hour.

Q And what route would you go?

RM We used to go right up here, down Blenkinsop to Cedar Hill X Road, Reynold Road and right in Quadra Street.

Q Do you remember the great snow in 1916?

RM Do I remember? I started out from here at seven o'clock in the morning with one team of horses and I got down as far as Mount Douglas X Road, after breaking through three or four drifts and then I took the horses off and I'd break through and I'd come back and hitch onto the bobsled. And, of course, not being used to snow or cold weather or anything like that, I hitched onto the bobsled and asked the horses to go and they went. Of course the runners had frozen to the snow and I had no idea. I broke the double tree and then I had to come back and my Dad said "You take Cliff". Cliff Cowardale, our hired man. "And one of you go ahead and break the trail and take the stone bolt, never mind the bobsled, because the bobsled had dug in too far". And, it took us until five o'clock that night to get into the City of Victoria. And we had the only milk that got into the City of Victoria.

Q That day? I certainly believe it. You were certainly a brave man to get all the way into town.

RM Oh it was stupid. We had to put up in the hotel, the two of us. We had to board our horses overnight, four horses and come back the next day. It was just about as much as we got for the milk.

Q Did the Royal Dairy pay on a daily basis or did you run an account with them too?

RM Every month. Well, they paid twice a month, the fifteenth and the thirtieth.

Q Can you remember what your slips used to average?

RM Oh well, no, not in those days, we were getting about twenty-five cents a gallon that's all. Of course milk was only selling for ten cents a quart.

Q Did your family join the Dairymens' Association?

RM Oh sure. Well, see the Vancouver Island Dairymens' Association, they didn't start until 1920. Oh yes.

Q Do you remember James Filmour? He was the first secretary of the Association.

RM Oh yes, I knew Jimmy Filmour very, very well. Sure, he used to live down here. Oh sure, I've known Jimmy Filmore for over fifty years.

Q Who were some of the other dairymen around this area? The Pendrays?

RM Oh yes, John Pendrays father had a dairy right at Swan Lake. You know, where Tom Pendray is down there at Swan Lake? Well, Johnny Pendray's father was just on the other side there, where the railroad crosses the road there, a little further on was Pendray Street or something. They subdivided the property there. And of course there was George Rogers. Once upon a time there was over three hundred retail licences in the City of Victoria. Today there is one.

Q And that's all?

RM That's all. Pendray at Swan Lake. That's the only person retailing raw milk in the City of Victoria today. The only one. Oh yes, there used to be Charlie King out here and Lambrick, Millers, Rapers, E & T Raper and Eddy Raper and Oh, I could name a dozen of them.

Q Oh, keep going. Who were your neighbours to the North here?

RM Luzzies. They just had a mixed farm, that's all.

Q And beyond them?

RM They used to grow loganberries, rubarb, turnips, just...

Q Sort of a truck garden.

RM Yes.

Q And who lived beyond them?

RM There was Luzzies, and next to them was Merttons and next to Merttons was ...as soon as you get out of the gate, I'll remember.

Q There was a lot of large farms around then though?

RM Not very many large ones, not around here. There wasn't any large farms. Ours was the biggest on Blenkinsop Road. If you went out to Central Saanich, down through the McHugh Valley...

Q There were bigger ones.

RM Oh sure. Sayward's farm. I think Saywards had about eight hundred acres. And then there was Rithet's farm which joined onto the back of us, which is Broadmead. That was the Rithet's farm. Arthur Lock he rented that in 1929, he and his brother and they stayed there until 1945, on the Rithet farm. He farmed it and he was also a cattle dealer.

Q Oh, he was the local auctioneer, was he?

RM No, he never did any auctioneering, Arthur Lock didn't.

Q He just used to deal in cattle. Did you used to go to the Auction to buy your cattle?

RM Oh no, not very often. We raised most of our cattle.

Q And how did you sell it off then? You butchered it?

RM Oh yes.

Q Would you sell it to any of your neighbours? Any of your cattle to your neighbours?

RM Oh yes, yes. We used to sell cows. We'd raise more than we really needed, you know. Yes, we would sell cows all the time.

Q When did you decided to cut back on your herd then?

RM Well, when labour got..in 1917.. when the war started, you know. We put in our first milking machine in 1917.

Q And that made it a little bit easier. But still you needed it with eighty head of cows. You needed lots of help on the farm.

RM Sure.

Q. Were they hard to get?

RM Yes, yes, yes. Of course, then when my brother-in-law came back from the war, he worked for us before the war, and when he came back from the war he went back to work for us. And that's when he married my sister.

Q And they stayed on the farm then?

RM Yes.

Q When did you let your herd go then Mr. Mercer?

RM 1957.

Q What made you decide?

RM Well, my brother-in-law died in January of 1957 and I was sixty-five years old and I thought I'd been chambermaid to cows for fifty years and so I thought it was time I had a retirement.

Q Well, I think it was well deserved. At that time did you subdivide some of your land?

RM Well we had sold some before that. We had sold fifty acres to Ed Lohbrunner and we had sold fifteen acres to his brother Louie. I don't know whether you know Stephen Mann or not, he lives over across the track there.

Q So you still had about one hundred and thirty-five acres.

RM That's when we sold to a man named William Olds and his wife from Cobble Hill. We sold it to them in April 1957 and they stayed here until 1963 and then they sold it and a German Prince owns it now. Johnny Pendray farms it.

Q So what do you have left here Mr. Mercer? How many acres?

RM Now? Me? I only have one acre.

Q But it's a nice piece of land.

RM Well, when we sold, I kept two acres and my sister lived down on the corner of Lohbrunner and Blenkinsop, and she had two acres. And, my daughter, she wanted to build a house. She used to play house up there on the rocks, you know, and she wanted a half of an acre and I said "Okay, I'll sell you a half an acre".

And I sold her a half an acre for One Dollar

Q That's a generous father.

RM And I had an acre and a half left and last Spring, before I went to the Old Country, she said "You know Daddy, one of these days this house is going to be sold. Somebody is going to build something down there on that other half acre I think you had better sell that to me." And I said "Well, you know the price of land now, don't you?" "That half an acre is worth thirty-five thousand dollars". She said "I'll take it." So she gave me another cheque for One Dollar.

Q You just have the one daughter, Mr. Mercer?

RM No, I have two. This one...

Q What's her name?

RM Phyllis Roberts. And the other one is Mrs. Ian Douglas. She lives on Queensbury.

Q And what's her first name?

RM Muriel. Muriel Ann and Phyllis Gertrude.

Q And Phyllis is the eldest daughter?

RM Yes. She worked with...the Government took it all over, what they call the Human Resources now. That's where she worked. She worked there for twenty-eight years. And Muriel, she is a school teacher. She teaches at Monterey. I think she's been teaching now for twenty-eight or nine years.

Q She's had a pretty good go at it then. Do you remember some of the Indians netting Salmon around here?

RM Not so much around here.

Q Cordova Bay way?

RM No. When we lived at Burnside Road, the Indians used to come there and get salmon out of Colquitz River. How long have you been in Saanich?

Q Just a short time.

RM Well there's lots of districts I talk about that you have no idea.

Q I've got an idea now from maps and that sort of thing. How did they do that then, did they just come down and stand on the river bank and net it all together?

RM No, no, they...Well it was no trick at all because the salmon were so thick you could just walk across them. In those days, you know, there was lots and lots of game and lots of salmon and everything. But they used to gaff them, they would sometimes just stand on the bridge and gaff them. They didn't actually have to go down there.

Q That would be in the Spring and the Fall then?

RM In the Fall.

Q In the Fall when they would be running upstream. What kind of game was about then?

RM There was pheasants and blue grouse and willow grouse, quail, partridge, Just the

other day, last week, I just happened to look out in the garden here and here there was a doe with a fawn drinking out of my bird baths. Right here.

Q Isn't that something.

RM We had to put up scarecrows as they were coming along and eating our beans.

Q Was there much deer around in the early days though?

RM Oh yes. Lots and lots of deer. All you'd have to do was go as far as Thetis Lake and you'd see all the deer you wanted. If you had to go down to China Beach that was a two-day trip with a horse and buggy. Was lots of game down there and lots of fish too.

Q Did you have to put up big fences then, to protect your garden?

RM Well, we never did, not around here. There wasn't that many deer around here, but there was down in Sooke and like that you know. Even today they have to put up high fences.

Q So, you could get your vegetables and you had fruit trees on the property?

RM Oh yes, but not very much. Just enough.

Q Enough for home?

RM That's about it.

Q What about your dry goods? Where did you shop for your dry goods?

RM In the City of Victoria.

Q Which store did you use?

RM Well, mostly it was Spencers, which is now Eatons.

Q And what about your grain? Did you ever buy grain or feed?

RM Yes, we used to buy from Brackman Kerr and Scot and Pedens. Scot and Pedens was an old, old firm in Victoria.

Q Was Scot and Pedens good prices?

RM Oh yes, yes. And then in 1919, 1920, we started a Farmers' Co-Op on Broad Street. But how we started it...during the War we wanted to buy straight from the Maple Leaf Milling Company...we wanted to buy carloads of bran and sorts of grain of that description. And well, the car would come in and all the farmers would go there and it was cash on delivery and some of the boys...well, maybe they didn't have the cash and maybe the other farmer, well he would have to take his two tons that he was supposed to take and it didn't work out very well so we opened a store. In connection with this store we had hardware...

Q Who opened this store, Mr. Mercer?

RM The Farmers' Co-Op.

Q Who ran the store?

RM A fellow by the name of...Well we had a manager. It was an incorporated company you know. We had a manager and secretary treasurer. And we had a meat department.

We had a grocery department. We had a hardware department. And there were things like that you know.

Q So it was a big operation then?

RM Well, I'll tell you what. We only had five thousand dollars paid up capital and we were doing forty thousand dollars worth of business.

Q Every year?

RM Every month!

Q Every month. That's incredible. What year did it start?

RM 1920.

Q And then how long did it run?

RM 1926 we went into liquidation.

Q With such a large volume of business, what happened?

RM Bad debts. Too much credit. Lots of credit and poor management.

Q Again, eh? So you just decided to liquidate. What happened then to the farmers? Did they go back to their old stores then?

RM Oh yes, yes.

Q Were you able to use the CNR Railway line back here for delivery, pickup or anything?

RM For a little while. We used to ship our milk on it for a little while, but it wasn't very satisfactory at all.

Q. What was the problem?

RM Well, getting the cans back, you know, and one thing and another. Of course, we were too close to town, we got a car and we used to take our own milk in then.

Q And that got to be a lot easier?

RM Oh yes.

Q Out of eighty cows, how many gallons of milk did you deliver a day? Can you give me a rough idea?

RM You would average about...we used to ship about ten cans a day, forty gallons a day. Johnny Pendray down here now, he's milking a hundred cows.

Q Did you have a mixed lot?

RM Yes, Holsteins and Jerseys.

Q Did you mix the milk then too?

RM Oh yes.

Q You didn't have some cans that you called exclusively Jersey?

RM Oh no, no.

Q That was all raw milk at that time?

RM Oh sure.

Q Did they have any health inspectors around then?



RM Oh yes.

Q Who would come around to check your barn?

RM Well I'll tell you who used to come around, it was Dr. Knight, the fellow that I had known all my life practically. He was the Inspector.

Q What sort of inspections would he make?

RM Well you know, he'd come around to see if everything was clean. And then in 1912 we had the first tests for tuberculousis. That was Provincial that used to come around and do that.

Q Did they just do sort of a small sample of your herd or did they do every one?

RM Every one. They tested every one.

Q And how did your herd come out?

RM The first test everybody lost cows. Because we had no idea, you know, had never been tested for TB and never knew what Tb was. And everybody lost. I think we lost eight head the first year. And some of them, five of them, were just year, year and a half old heifers.

Q Must have been a pretty tragic loss.

RM Well, we didn't know anything about it. You know, what I mean to say. My Dad said "I would like to see those killed". And they said "Well you can come over to the abattoir and see them killed".. Oh, they'd go in the glands and say "There it is". Well it didn't know no more about it than the man in the moon. It just looked like an ordinary gland to us, you know. We didn't know what TB was.

Q Where was the local abattoir?

RM Over where Rapers used to live on the Burnside Road. Called Porter's Slaughter House

Q And who ran that?

RM Well, Porters. Porters had a big business in Victoria. They had two retail stores. And they used to bring the cattle in from the Interior, live, and kill them out there at the slaughter house and truck them into Victoria.

Q All the way across the water too?

RM Oh sure.

Q They had a fairly large business. Where would they take their meat to? Just to the City?

RM Yes.

Q Anywhere else?

RM Well, they used to sell to the different butchers around Victoria.

Q So, they were sort of like a wholesale house then?

RM Sure.

Q Well Mr. Mercer, we are coming to the end of our tape. I was just wondering if there are any more stories that you would like to pass along to us. Some funny

time you remember?

RM Oh, not anything of any interest you know.

Q Oh, it's all of interest.

RM You see, when this road was first opened all you would see is one team of horses go along here in a day besides our own.

Q And whose would that be?

RM But now, my goodness gracious. You can't count up to five without a car going by here all the time. You try getting out of this yard at twenty minutes to eight in the morning.

Q Next to impossible, is it?

RM Yes.

Q You've certainly seen a lot of changes in this area. Would you say it is better times now?

RM No. We had the best of it in those days. Oh yes.

Q Even with all that hard work?

RM Oh yes, we didn't mind. We used to have to get up at four and five o'clock in the morning. Sometimes we would just be coming back from a dance and Papa would be just coming downstairs. A nice how-do-you-do. We'd just have time to change our clothes and go to work. Oh, you're young and you can take it.

Q Those were the days for courting then. By the time you got your girl home it was five o'clock in the morning. And what would you have said to your daughter if it were that late when she came home?

RM Chip off the old block. Oh no, both my daughters were...I have a grandson that works for Saanich.

Q Is that right. What's his name?

RM Paul Douglas. Works down there in the Sanitary Engineer's Department. You should meet him some day.

MERCER, ROBERT W.

I was born in the 22nd of March 1892 in the City of Victoria. My Dad, William, and Mother, Rebecca, came out from Preston, Lancashire in 1887. He was raised on a farm, but was a wood turner by trade. They stayed in Winnipeg for a little over a year and my sister Anne was born there on October 28, 1888. Then they moved to Vancouver and stayed there for a little over a year before coming to Victoria. He worked in a mill (Muirhead and Mann) in Victoria but farming was always in his heart. He built a house at Alpha and Gamma Streets and we moved out there. I was just eight at the time. He had a cow there and when neighbours started asking for milk he bought another cow, and that is when he started expanding. From there we moved to Burnside Road in 1900, where the Colquitz Junior High School is now. In 1909 he moved out to the country, to the Blenkinsop Valley.

I first went to Kings Road School then to North Ward and I finished my education at the first Tolmie School. At first I walked all the way from our house in the Blenkinsop Valley to school, but later I was lucky enough to have a bicycle.

Blenkinsop Valley first opened up in 1906, so Father went out and looked the place over. He ended up by buying 125 acres, made a down payment and the rest to be paid off at \$50 per month to the British Columbia and Land Investment Co. Mother never thought he would be able to do it. In three years my Father had built the house and a barn big enough to house 50 head of cattle and we moved out in 1909. Afterwards he purchased 75 acres for \$14,000 from Tom, Harry and Monty Simmons, making 200 acres. We purchased the Simmons land to get access to the Lake.

When the CNR came through they took five acres and paid us \$14,500. They ran from Point Ellice to Deep Cove. They took the timber out of the bush to use for piles when the trestle was built over Lost Lake, or Blenkinsop Lake as it is called now.

When I finished school I stayed on the farm. We had dairy cattle. We delivered milk for about a year after moving to the Blenkinsop Valley, but it was too far out to deliver milk by horse to the old customers, so the route was sold to the Victoria Creamery and we then sold our milk on the wholesale market. At that time A.G. Lambrick's nephew, Arther, started to buy our milk and take it to his place on Kings Road to bottle and sell it. We used horses until 1917 when we got our first Model T. Ford.

I had two sisters, Anne Priscilla and Lillian Francis, and one brother, James. We

Mercer, Robert W (Cont'd) ..2..

used to go out to Cordova Bay in the Summer and one day in the summer of 1912 my brother was out in the Bay on a log. He fell off and when he came up he stunned himself on the log and drowned. There were tenters at the Bay in the summer then, land was so cheap you could have had most of the Bay for \$50. Fred Norris owned quite a bit of property up the hill from the beach and of course, McMorrans owned quite a lot.

When Blenkinsop Valley first opened up the neighbours were the Davidsons, Mertons, Lusse, McMartins, McMorrans, Deacons, Pearces, Oliphants, Woollands and Nicholsons.

Jim Miller had a cow barn down on Shelbourne where he kept a herd of Jerseys. Munro Miller lined up on Cedar Hill Road and Merretts lived on the opposite corner, where the Lutheran Church is now.

There was no Shelbourne Street when we moved out to Blenkinsop Road. Along Cedar Hill Road were the Merrimans, Tods, and Maddocks. Opposite Tods was a man named Scott. He had a big farm on the corner of Torquay and Shelbourne. Charlie King used to rent Braefoot Farm from the Tolmies. He was in the milk business for years.

Blenkinsop Road ran down to Tolmies place originally, but later that part was named Tattersal.

When I got married in 1916 my father built my house as a wedding present. It cost \$2600 to build and it and one acre of land sold for \$175,000 in 1981. We had mixed farming, sheep, turkeys and a mixed herd of Holsteins and Jerseys.

My dad died in 1925 at the age of 66. Mother was 76 when she died in 1941. I retired myself in 1957.

Going back to the earlier years, we sold some property to Ed Lohburnner and we gave him access to it which he called Lohburnner Road.

I sold the last of the property in 1981, and have seen so many changes in the time I lived in the Blenkinsop Valley. I have many happy memories of life there.

From an interview with Bob Mercer, #309, 1745 Leighton Avenue,  
on February 3, 1983, by Jo Anne Morrison