

**Len Simmonds**

**Interview by Mary Jackson, 14 March 1988**

**Words in bold print are by interviewer**

**Tape #1 Side 1**

I'm Leonard Simmonds 1313 Blenkinsop Road, I was born in Blenkinsop Valley, right in the farm homestead.

**Where was that, here?**

No, just down the road a little way, it amounts to, my Dad came out in 1902 and he came out with 4 brothers. One brother sponsored the other – there were 5 brothers altogether and he sponsored the 4 brothers coming out to the farm. This farm that he got for them to come out to from England was 105 acres, just across from here and one brother he was a baker in town, but the other 4 came out to the farm which was just straight bush. The lake down there was at one time called Lost Lake. The reason was it was lost, because no one ever saw it. And Blenkinsop Road was just a plain lane, more or less, you could ride a bicycle on it. That's about all it was.

**Wasn't cleared at all.**

No, in fact when they did make the road through, my uncle had a great big stump that must have been 5 or 6 feet through, it was left in the centre of the road. He got so mad at it that he took and blasted it out himself, nobody was doing anything about it and he took this big stump out. In any case it was mostly wooded and at that time, my Dad and my uncles they took and cut the wood to be able to use it as farms. Well this cordwood used to be taken down, to what is now Lake Hill, a big brick building where the restaurant is, what is it?

**The Keg.**

Yes, the Keg, that was where the pump house was, and they used to haul a quota there for pumping the water from Elk Lake for Victoria.

**Oh really.**

Yes, after they had got some of it cultivated and ready for farming, they went in for strawberries, and loganberries, things like that, but like all the other things out at Gordon Head it ran out, because strawberries always like virgin soil, so if you ran out of soil you had to go into another place. Then they actually, - my Dad he went in for Butcher and he used to have a stall – in fact the 3 brothers had stalls down in Victoria Public Market.

### **Isn't that where the Police Station is now?**

Yes, that's right, that's where they used to go, they used to go twice a week I believe, this was when I was just small, so I don't know too much about that, but I know they raised a lot of pigs and rabbits and chickens and whatever – you know. Well I guess with the event of the tractor and that sort of thing I mean to say, the small farmers were more or less dried up, and so eventually along Blenkinsop Valley was more or less leased out to Chinese. These Chinese a lot of my Dad was made to start with, the bigger areas were Chinese, both my uncles had Chinese on their land, and with this they cut down their acreage and were growing say loganberries or something like that and let the Chinese have the rest.

### **So it became something like a small holding then?**

That's right, well this 105 acres that they had, it was divided up between the 3 brothers, and they each had 35, then my Dad found 35 acres wasn't what he wanted, so he sold it out which was Mercers Dairy Farm along here, so his 35 acres out. And bought 10 off his brother, so he had 10 and one uncle had 25 instead of 35 and the other one still had the 35. Now of course to see the nursery over here where the other brother sold his part.

### **Right.**

But it used to be Chinese, so you see all of it has changed so in any case, - came along the dirty 30s, I guess everybody was at it and so they hung on through though, and I imagine they more or less looked after themselves, just leased it out to the Chinese.

### **They must have found it difficult or more difficult to market the produce.**

Well it did, I mean to say when the Victoria Market was on you could take all your produce in there and have it, but that sort of paled out and it was no longer viable, so they had to do something right on the land. Well, I know my Dad he used to go out and work for Saanich for quite a while.

### **To supplement the farming.**

That's right, yes in the – oh – I don't know I imagine it would be in the early 30s.

### **Do you know what he did Mr. Simmonds?**

In Saanich, labour, on the roads.

### **What about your Mum, did she stay at home with the family?**

That's right, yes there was 5 of us, used to keep her busy.

**She never worked at all outside the home.**

No, well they did try one or two things, but well, - though my uncle and Dad had what they used to call at that time a Jitney service to Cordova Bay, they used to take people out there for the summer months when they travel out there for the day and go back home again. My uncle had a great big Studebaker used to have one of these horns let him know they were coming, so it's a case of – really – then my mother had at that time, she had what was known at that time Uncle Tom's Cabin, that was a store, used to sell ice cream and that sort of thing in the summer time.

**Oh, was this right on the property?**

No this was down at Cordova Bay resort.

**Whereabouts would that be now?**

Where would it be – ah, do you know where Agate Lane is?

**Yes.**

Well not quite opposite but just a little bit towards the Village Town to where it was, there was a store there.

**Did she make her own ice cream?**

No, I couldn't really tell you that, but I imagine they bought it, it wasn't long after that, the others had the same idea.

**Sounds like a good one.**

Eventually, I mean to say just like cops, the bigger ones took over and the little ones more or less faded away. Any way I mean to say we have seen an awful lot of difference in the valley here, as far as fancy houses and things. Mean to say lot of cows through here, the dairies, Par Three was a dairy, then there was Glendinning Farm which was sheep. Then along here Pearce Crescent there was a person who used to have pigs. There were horses and whatever you know. We have far more horses now, then we ever had. Used to be cows at that time. Then on the other side of the road, beyond Pearce Crescent used to be a cattle farm in there too, mostly dairy cattle.

**What about the Lohbrunners?**

Lohbrunners. Well yes. Ed came from Union Avenue, that's where he had his first nursery, then he moved and bought some of the Mercer property and he went in the back there. One of the big assets was he had a pool back there for his frogs, he was very interested in Alpine plants and also water lillies and things like that, shrubs. But I remember once, - well he came to where I was working up here and he was trying to find water, and on his property on Union Avenue, he thought he could just dig a hole and find water. He wasn't doing too well, so my boss at that time came along, said what are you doing Ed? He said digging a well. [You] can't find water on the top of a hill like that you know, just [starting to dig a well]. So any way he came up to the greenhouses where I was working. He was trying to find out what chance there was of getting water. I said to him what are you doing Ed? I'm in the process of getting water using the douser rod. My Mum used to do that at one time.

**She did it for neighbours going to different people.**

Well she did it, if anybody wanted water, she was very good at it, this water dousing through Cordova Bay up over towards Elk Lake and that sort of thing, but the only thing was she had to make sure she didn't get somebody else's well, if they were down lower and you got on the same stream you drain the other person's well which you have got to make sure you don't do. I could do it too, it isn't everybody can do it, of course the big thing is to be able to carry electricity.

**Is that how it works? I've often wondered, but I didn't know.**

Carry electricity, and I said to Ed, well first thing Ed, you don't want rubber boots on when you are trying to divine water, I said, because you can't get it you know, so he immediately took off his rubber boots. Anyway, I told him where there was a stream that he could try on but – oh it's a nice thing to play around with. I remember when we had an electric company, they were putting in a line of poles for us in here and I said now, I said, look I don't know whether you know, but I got a [water line] under there, I don't want you putting a pole in my water line. They said – oh no there is no danger of that and he handed me a rod, just a plain, ordinary rod by the look of it. Oh, he says, you can soon find the water line this way, so I tried it. Well you could just take it along like this, - but as I say, it isn't everybody can do that, we used to do it with rose sticks, and out of the 5 of us I was the only one besides my mother – I never went out, but I fooled around you know – it was quite a thing, but there was one fellow at that time he used to go water divining, and he used to be quite a high priced fellow too for water divining. When he was doing anything, he always put a cloth over his head, he wouldn't let anybody see what he was doing.

**You mean he used to put a cloth over his own head or other peoples?**

Yes, I don't know whether you have seen any of these old cameras on tripods.

**Yes.**

Well, he wasn't taking pictures, he was doing his water divining with a hood over the top, he wouldn't let anybody see him doing it.

**I see.**

My Mom wasn't like that.

**Well, as you say, not everyone can do it, there must be an art to it.**

It really takes it out on you, because there is quite a flow of you know electricity whatever you like to call it but the water has got to be running, it won't work on stagnant water. Well, they've seen an awful lot of changes through the valley and separate things that have changed, I mean to say, take my own occupation up there greenhouses, I did my apprenticeship then I took over and managed it for 2 or 3 years, before I decided I was going to buy. We used to supply the roses to Victoria, at least my boss did. Well, interesting little thing was we used to supply the red roses for King George VI when he was here in 1937, for his breakfast table. At that time we used to grow roses and supply a few here and a few there. You see we didn't get that many orders all the time, like Ballantyne's & Browns & one or two others, posy shop, but anyway they used to all take a few dozen, but then that didn't take all our supply, so that was when we went into wholesalers in Vancouver, used to ship them over there. We lost too many, we didn't have any refrigeration then and you keep your flowers – oh roses around May, now for instance you pick them on Friday, when you went to sell them on Monday because no work on Sunday, - Saturday I suppose it wouldn't make – you know, two days together we would lose a lot of them because they would just come out too far, we used to keep them cool the best way we could, but there wasn't any refrigeration at all, nothing like that, the only refrigeration at that time was D. Wilson, which was below freezing and that's no good for roses. Anyway when I took it over, we put up a couple more greenhouses and I had to myself. I couldn't manage the roses and the carnations, both of them, and keep them properly going, because roses demand an awful lot of work, and if you do the roses properly, well you couldn't have done the carnations. What I did was, I asked the fellow I was managing for then, he was a doctor, how about letting me tear those roses out and putting in carnations, so he went along with me, so he said if you think that best go ahead, so I went in to all the carnations and we did very well. Well I shipped to Jone's, Jones wholesale, let me see now, a bit of confusion, I was the last one in there actually, they came along and said well, we don't need you fellows anymore because we're bringing these imports in and we can – and get the ones we want, all the colours we want and a lot cheaper.

**Where were they coming from?**

California, sometimes Florida, but mostly California.

**That's incredible wasn't it to bring them in cheaper; I mean there would be the transportation costs.**

Yes, well at that time it wasn't so much trucking as flying them out but the thing was, they had the temperature down there, they had the sun down there, and we didn't get that kind of sunshine through the fall and that's where they had the big saving so consequently over a period of years they took and really weaned us out, that's when Crease over on Shelbourne Street they came in to fill up the gap after I left off the roses. They were tomato people, but they started on the roses, I don't know if you know anything about Crease, they are gone now.

**I don't know where they would be located on Shelbourne.**

Well, there was quite a number of these flower growers over there. There was Louie Orrico, he was carnations same as myself, Harry Montague, Mickey Jamieson, but Crease was quite a large outfit but they subdivided and got to a point where it was easier to subdivide and sell the land, then it was to try and produce.

**Well all that land now is gone.**

Yes gone, yes well I think there is – Mickey Jamieson's is still there, I think some – oh let me see now, Charlie Lum I think it is, has some.

**He is still there.**

We have seen an awful lot of changes, but I mean to say, from that period, I changed over to carnations, I had 10,000.

**What year would this be now?**

That's speaking about 1943 – 44 I guess it was, and we were also growing an awful lot of Irises at that time, Dutch Iris and we've been pretty well through the mill in quite a few things.

**Awful lot of plants it seems to me.**

Yes 10,000 then of course I did practically all my own propagating and growing them. It was only when you wanted new varieties that you took and went to the people that grow them down in the States, and that meant an awful lot of rigmarole getting them through. We used to buy them in by the hundreds. I mean the hundred varieties then we used to propagate ourselves to get them out which took a lot longer, took about 3 years to make sure they would suit our clients, that was another thing. Then there were a bunch of varieties that they grew that simply didn't sell, we couldn't sell orange, we couldn't sell purple and one or two

of the others you've got to – and another one blood red is not good either just, wouldn't sell. You would sell a few, but that's no good to a greenhouse, but first of all, I mean to say when my boss, when we first started up with carnations, we bought them from England.

**Did you.**

Yes, that was quite a thing too.

**Just a little seedling plant?**

No, cuttings, sometimes you got them through and sometimes you didn't, it all depends where they get stuck somewhere, you know they'd only survive for so long.

**Yes, they would be flown out too I expect.**

I'm not sure, they must have been, but this is going back quite a way, I mean to say boss started up about 1933 I guess it was. I know we had these plants, and they came from England, but I'm not sure just how they got through. Anyway those varieties didn't grow here, so we had to turn over and go to American varieties and the varieties didn't always grow well here, so we had to find out which were the best ones and then eradicate the others and then buy more of them. It was quite a rigmarole to get them over the border. We used to have to pay customs duty on them and that brought the price up pretty high you know.

**Was there any sort of agricultural or horticultural whatever I guess agricultural restrictions on bringing plants in?**

Well they did have to inspect them and that was a big thing because they figured we knew more about them than they did. But any way they had to inspect them, make sure there weren't any diseases on them bringing them into here you see, that was the big thing. Well [prusarian wilt] was one of the ones we had to watch for, that's dynamite it would wipe you right out. We used to get along very well with the customs fellows, but the thing was, you couldn't bring many in because as I say you had to experiment with them and make sure they were alright to grow.

**Did you ever have an instance where disease would wipe out your crop?**

No, we had what we call West Coast disease, that seemed to be pretty prevalent here, but I think it was more or less a climatic condition, where they got too damp – oh the humidity was too high in there or something you know if somebody planted them too close and all that sort of thing and it sort of just took over. We used to have the ordinary bugs that really pestered us then of course came all those new insecticides and everything. I always liked to be about – well I was

about roughly about 8 – 8 different – you see they bring out usually a new insecticide every year and I always figure that if I was back about 5 or 6 of those years I had all that ahead of me to get, but you see these bugs build up a resistance and then you can't use that insecticide, you had to get a stronger one. It got to be around – oh – I guess it must have been 49 – 50 that this D.D.T. came out and of course we didn't know it was harmful or anything else about like that. We didn't use much D.D.T. here, but they used an awful lot up in the Okanagan and they lost a lot of birds up there. I always like to be back about 4 different types of insecticides back, then I never used to use the same insecticide twice in a row, because if you do, the bugs get used to them and you can't kill them, so if you alternated you'd catch them off guard and that sort of thing. It's always best to alternate your spray, so you don't use the same one all the time.

**You must have been apprenticed up here.**

That's right.

**What did your apprentice consist of, did you have to go to school?**

You didn't go to school anywhere, there was nothing like that here. Well my boss which was the son of the doctor he went to – it wasn't McGill – from New York somewhere. Anyway – he went through and then when he came out, he graduated from there – he came out and worked in Langley [\_\_\_\_] greenhouses with another fellow that had gone through which was another grower, he went right through, but I worked under him. When I first started up, we had all these different varieties of apples here from England. They were great on English stuff and we were experimenting with these apples grafting and budding and all the rest of it, various fruit trees, like cherries, plums and everything like that. I hadn't been there very long before they found out that the people here didn't know the varieties, so they wouldn't sell them when they got them and when they went to try and sell them through the fruit board, you had to have a full box which is 60 lbs at that time of all the same grade or otherwise you couldn't sell them. You would get about ½ a box of a certain grade and not enough to finish it, so what do you do with them. Then there were some varieties that just wouldn't sell at all. Now we used to have orange cox which is very popular today. But the same time, at that time you know people would buy them. We had some apples, - oh they were lovely to eat, right off the tree you know, and that sort of thing. We had other apples that if they got the slightest bit of rain, they would just split in half. Things like that, but we tore all these apples out and went in for those carnations because it just wasn't paying. We went through quite a lot of stuff in my time, I wasn't on everything naturally but I mean to say, but it was under guidance of this fellow that had them.

**It was on the job training.**



That's right. Oh I had a thorough going through – we used to build our own greenhouses and put in the heating, all the hot water systems and all that sort of thing, we went right from the bottom to the top, wasn't too much missing. But in any case, it's a marvellous thing to do. We had to more or less do it through trying – to find out what was the best, but I don't think anybody really knew all the answers because as I say the climatic conditions were here were different to Ontario or whatever, so if one person was right, the next one, it wouldn't work with them. Then you got these various different things that came from what is now known as research stations. Which was fine, if you had all these new facilities that you could add them and all like that, but when it comes right down to having, - having to produce something that's going to be out on the market and you've got to really produce it, it is a little different thing.

### **Tape #1 Side 2**

Anyway, I mean to say, used to be an Experimental Station at one time where I was first – knew of it and all the rest of it and I know when the boss left he said – oh – well – he said, if you run into any trouble, always remember that's out there and that's supposed to look after you. Eventually I mean to say we found out more from growing the plants than what they could do for us out there, because there weren't enough growers here to make it worthwhile and the government wasn't going to put money out for that sort of thing. They wanted to see something, well then they came and looked at ours, you see, rather than do it themselves as far as carnations went. There wasn't anything for roses at all, just more or less had to find that out yourself. They were there if you really wanted to get help, they'd give you whatever they could, and at that time, why, the insecticides weren't as good as they are now. Of course on the other hand they didn't harm you either.

### **They weren't as potent.**

No, no, so it got to be a point where I just wouldn't handle it anymore and besides that they wouldn't make them. I mean to say we had tobacco powder around for years, had them in little containers and made gas and all the rest of it, we used the gas masks to make sure and that sort of thing, but they weren't nearly – well we did have cyanide, calcium cyanide for tomatoes, but there were always warning signs up, just don't enter you know. I ride in the morning and had a sign on the door, you just didn't go in. We never had any problems, but others did, they had this emphysema and that sort of thing, I never had – any problem with it. But in any case – the Experimental Station is a good thing to have around, there's no doubt about that, but when there is such a few of you they just don't do it. They went into Holly out there for a long time and perfected that just in time to have all the plastic Holly and that killed that.

**I can remember the lovely Holly Farms out in Gordon Head. Of course there aren't any more, or there may be that I don't know about, but there used to be lots of them.**

Oh yes, down where General Foods is there was a big Holly Farm there and I knew quite a few holly farms out at Gordon Head yes. But most of them have fallen to subdivisions. I went out and decided I was going to try a bit of holly too and I've got quite a few bushes and I bought them, but the thing is they take such a long time to grow and if your soil isn't right they just don't grow. I mean to say there were bunches of holly trees up on the top – between – on the gravel – the gravel between Cordova Bay and Pat Bay.

**Oh yes.**

All the time I was up there they always seemed to be so high they never seemed to grow any, funny it takes a long time. I planted mine in about I guess 50 – 52, so you see so mine are not that big, they are up about 10 or 12 feet now, but the trouble was, it went on a bash, it's coming back in again now, but at the same time people decided that they'd rather have the plastic flowers.

**I can remember when we first came out here, that's getting close to 20 years ago, the big thing was to send holly to people at Christmas time, people in the Prairies just loved to have holly from Victoria.**

Yes, that's right, they just don't have it. But it certainly went downhill, there is no doubt about that, but you can always sell some. Oh I've been dabbling around in quite a few things, well, really what I have to do now is to try and grow something that other people haven't got, that's about what it amounts to. You see this new idea the government's got right now and I don't know whether it's going to take effect or not. The idea is, you've got to make \$5,000 off the farm to be able to classify it as a farm. Well there are a lot of farms you see, before is used to be 1,600 for 10 acres, well that wasn't too bad but there were a lot farms under 10 acres. Now, we went to the Legislature with the greenhouse association I belong to on that and we got classified as a farm even if it was a small one, because you didn't need 10 acres to have greenhouses. Now we have got to produce \$5,000 a year sales on small acreages, I'm afraid this is going to have an adverse effect for people that have got those small acreages, I know it is the same thing in my own that most of my green houses have gone, they've worn out, 50 years old, they just don't stand up any more and they are not safe. The thing is they are not going to be able to make this, and I'm really worried about it, because I can't make it myself I don't suppose without having a range of greenhouses on, and yet you've been all this amount of years and you try to keep it as a farm, but you are not going to be able to if that's happening because there's lots like it. And this is the sad fact. Whether they are going to change this or not I don't know, but I sure hope so.

**That was fairly recent, wasn't that just about a year ago when that came out?**

Yes, it's supposed to come into effect next year, but I don't know how it is ever going to happen because either a lot of farms are going to be sold, that's what it amounts to because they can't make that much. I mean, you take even the hay farm supposing you had 20 acres of hay farm, unless it is a real good cropping farm you are not going to make it.